

# Desolate Era

(莽荒纪)

Book 27

Twelve Palaces

I Eat Tomatoes

(我吃西红柿)

Story Description:

Fate had never been kind to Ji Ning. Wracked by illnesses and infirm his entire life on Earth, Ning knew early on that he would die as a teenager. What he didn't know was that there really was such a thing as life after death, and that the multiverse was a far larger place than he thought. A lucky twist of fate (one of the few in Ning's life) meant that Ning was reborn into a world of Immortals and monsters, of Ki Refiners and powerful Fiendgods, a world where Dynasties lasted for millions of years. A world which is both greater...and yet also smaller...than he ever could imagine. He would have the opportunity to join them, and in this life, Ning swore to himself, he would never let himself be weak again! The Era he was born into was a Desolate one, but Ning would make it his era.

Original Story can be found here: [Link](#)

# Chapter 1: Swordlord

The Palace of the Sword was incredibly large. It was like an enormous island-continent that hovered in the air, filled with countless buildings and radiating a sword-aura that caused Ji Ning to feel speechless.

The Sword Palace had numerous black-armored Daolords on patrol outside of it.

“Fellow Daoist.” A black-armored Daolord sensed Ning’s medallion and immediately flew towards him, then said in a fairly courteous and modest manner, “Is this your first trip to the Sword Palace?”

“Yes.” Ning nodded.

“My name is Fudan. Let me guide the way for you, fellow Daoist.” This black-armored Daolord was courteous to the point of being obsequious. He glanced at Su Youji. Seeing that Su Youji clearly wasn’t a member of the Sword Palace, he didn’t say much to her.

“I am Darknorth,” Ning said.

“Junior apprentice-brother Darknorth, you come to us with an identity medallion on your very first visit. Are you from the Astral Islands?” The black-armored Daolord asked while leading the way.

“Yes.” Ning nodded.

“A new entrant into our Sword Palace from the Astral Islands. Junior apprentice-brother, you are incredible!” The black-armored Daolord laughed. By now, they had already reached a stone path that was three thousand meters wide. This path led straight towards the main gates of the Sword Palace. Right above the massive gates were two words that were written in a vigorous, bold manner: ‘Sword’ ‘Palace’!

These two words were overflying with so much sword-intent that it filled the entire Sword Palace, then soared upwards into the skies. Even the multiple layers of folded spacetime around the palace were unable to impede it.

Ning felt stunned upon seeing it. These two characters possessed such

incredibly dense sword-intent that they could be described as the most terrifying example of calligraphy he had ever seen.

“These two words were left behind by the first Palace Lord of our Sword Palace, Emperor Windsnow,” the black-armored Daolord said. “Junior apprentice-brother Darknorth, have you been informed about the rules one needs to follow in order to establish a new palace?”

“Establish a new palace?” Ning was puzzled. He truly had never heard of such a thing.

The black-armored Daolord Fudan explained, “Long, long ago, the almighty Hegemon established the Brightshore Kingdom and put tremendous time and effort into cultivating his Daolords. Back then, the Twelve Palaces didn’t exist. As the almighty Hegemon put it, one had to be strong enough to be the equal of an Eternal Emperor before one could set up a new palace of one’s own.”

The black-armored Daolord continued, “Emperor Windsnow was the earliest of the major powers of the Brightshore Kingdom. Back when he was merely a Daolord, he was already an utterly dazzling figure who was more than strong enough to match an Eternal Emperor in might. He established the Sword Palace and became its first Palace Lord. Later on, he succeeded in his Daomerge and became an Eternal Emperor, at which point he rewrote the words ‘Sword Palace’ that hung above the palace gates. As the Emperor once said... those two characters contain the essence of the Dao of the Sword which he used to gain eternity.”

Ning nodded slowly.

As more time had passed, more palaces had arisen. By now, the Brightshore Kingdom had a total of twelve palaces.

There eventually were quite a few cultivators who were a match for Eternal Emperors or even capable of slaying them! However, these current twelve palaces encompassed the vast majority of cultivation paths, and thus it had been an extremely long time since a new palace had been established. Ning was a good example. His path was that of the Dao of the Sword, and thus even if he became an Eternal Emperor in the future he

would belong to the Sword Palace. There was no need and no point to establishing a new palace.

“That is the Dao of the Sword he used to gain eternity?” Ning raised his head to stare at those characters.

“I don’t understand it,” Su Youji murmured softly.

“Neither do I.” Ning laughed. “The intent and will which this Dao of the Sword embodies isn’t for people like us to comprehend. The difference between it and us is simply too great. Perhaps when we become Daolords of the Third Step or Daolords of the Fourth Step, we can come back and scrutinize the secrets it holds.”

The three continued to advance as they chatted and laughed.

This wide stone path had quite a few other cultivators traversing it as well, all of whom were World-level cultivators. Although they were quite spread out, the path was so long and so wide that Ning estimated that he had seen at least ten thousand people.

“Why?”

“Why did I fail yet again? A hundred chaos cycles, only to fail yet again... ahahaha...”

Wild laughter rang out from afar from a cultivator who seemed to be laughing with tears or crying with laughter. He seemed utterly mad.

“Who is this?” Ning was puzzled.

Daolord Fudan shook his head. “These are all World-level cultivators who seek to pass the trials for joining the Sword Palace. Aside from those like yourself who are given formal invitations, junior apprentice-brother Darknorth, cultivators who wish to join us generally have to undergo multiple layers of trials. All of them are here training, and once they reach a certain level of power they will try out the trials. Alas! Ignore them. After enough time passes, most of them realize that they have no hopes of entering and will leave on their own.”

Ning nodded slowly.

“This path into the palace is known as Sword Road,” Daolord Fudan said. “Aside from those who are taking part in the various trials, most of the visiting World-level cultivators spend their time here on Sword Road. They are forbidden from entering any other part of the Sword Palace.”

They continued to walk forwards through Sword Road. Sword Road was ten thousand kilometers long, and they saw many World-level cultivators along the way. When these cultivators saw Ning, many found it difficult to disguise the envy they felt. For a black-armored Daolord to treat Ning with such courtesy and deference meant that he had to be a formal member of the Sword Palace.

Boom!

Bang!

Explosions suddenly rang out from afar.

Ning glanced over with surprise. “Is that a duel?” Upon closer examination, he saw that a red-haired man wielding a greatsword was battling an opponent with six arms. The red-haired man had tousled hair and was standing there in a relaxed fashion as he launched his attacks, while his opponent was fighting back at maximum power with many magic treasures.

Alas, it was like an ant trying to shake a tree. The second person was completely unable to do anything to the red-haired man, but with each strike the red-haired man was able to cause the space around him to oscillate in a manner reminiscent of a beautiful song. Although he was able to force his opponent back repeatedly, his opponent wasn’t injured either.

Ning’s face turned pale as he watched. What terrifying sword-arts. These sword-arts... they were definitely superior to his own! In the Astral Islands, most likely only Bertulu was at a higher level of skill than this man.

“Haha, senior apprentice-brother Wildfire is dueling,” Daolord Fudan said.

“Senior apprentice-brother Wildfire?” Ning was puzzled. Fudan was a

Daolord. No matter how badass the red-haired man was, he was still just at the World level. Fudan addressed Ning as ‘junior apprentice-brother’, but addressed this man as ‘senior apprentice-brother Wildfire’?

“Senior apprentice-brother Wildfire is one of the six mighty Swordlords of our Sword Palace,” Daolord Fudan immediately explained.

“Six Swordlords? They are all World-level cultivators, right?” Ning was puzzled.

“The Sword Palace has a total of more than a hundred Samsara Daolords and more than two hundred World-level cultivators,” Daolord Fudan said. “The two hundred-plus World-level cultivators were accumulated over the course of many years. They represent the most powerful experts of the Dao of the Sword which the Brightshore Kingdom has managed to recruit.”

The Brightshore Kingdom was a top-tier power that was on par with the Dao Alliance. Only the most dazzlingly, outstandingly talented World-level sword practitioners were able to join it, and only around two hundred had been granted entry.

“Of these two hundred, only the ones who are acknowledged by the Sword Pagodas are given the title of Swordlord,” Daolord Fudan said. “There are more than two hundred World-level cultivators but just six Swordlords. Although they are merely at the World level, the Sword Palace treats them as they would Daolords. This is because they are generally capable of killing some weaker Daolords of the First Step.”

“Kill Daolords of the First Step?” Ning stared in amazement at the relaxed-looking red-haired man.

A World-level cultivator who could kill a Daolord of the First Step?

Being ‘able to fight’ someone and being ‘able to kill’ someone... these were two completely different concepts.

In the Astral Islands, perhaps only Bertulu in his true form would be capable of killing a Daolord of the First Step. But the Sword Palace actually had six individuals capable of this?

“They could’ve broken through to become Samsara Daolords long ago, but they refused to do so because their sword-arts are still improving.” Daolord Fudan sighed. “Each of them are working on perfecting their sword-arts. They wish to perfect those sword-arts to the absolute maximum possible level before they become Daolords. After all, the more perfect one’s Dao of the Sword is, the stronger one will be as a Daolord.”

Ning nodded.

Bertulu was a good example of someone who was at such a high level of insight that even without revealing his true form, he was capable of dominating Ning with his two warhammers. Given his profound insights, once he became a Daolord, he would probably be able to match Daolords of the Third Step! Clearly, the six supremely talented Swordlords of the Sword Palace were all people of great ambition.

“My sword-arts are not even enough for me to become a Daolord. This ‘senior apprentice-brother Wildfire’, however, could’ve used his sword-arts to become a Daolord long ago... and he’s only gotten even better since then.” Ning was stunned. “No wonder his sword-arts are so much better than mine.”

“Next!”

Suddenly, the red-haired man’s greatsword suddenly swept out. Boom! Even before it had touched his opponent, invisible layers of spatial energy crashed out and swept his opponent away, sending him flying multiple kilometers.

“Thank you for your guidance, senior apprentice-brother Wildfire.” His opponent hurriedly spoke out to express his thanks. Actually, he had yet to pass the trials of the Sword Palace; for him to address Wildfire as ‘senior apprentice-brother’ was a show of shamelessness, but that was how most of the other World-level cultivators acted as well.

“Please give me some guidance, senior apprentice-brother.” Yet another World-level cultivator stepped forward, then began to use all the techniques he had available to fight Wildfire.

“He’s able to effortlessly crush them with a casual blow.” Ning couldn’t

help but sigh. “He is like an old man instructing children. They are all at the World level, and his challengers are extraordinarily strong cultivators who wield Eternal weapons and are comparable to supreme World Gods, but they seem to be absolutely nothing before his might.”

“The Sword Palace has built up tremendous power over the years.” The nearby Daolord Fudan laughed. “Once you enter the Sword Palace, you’ll need to start improving your own skills as well. Still, to reach senior apprentice-brother Wildfire’s level will be very difficult. After all, there are over two hundred World-level cultivators in the Sword Palace, but only six have been given the title of ‘Swordlord’.”

# Chapter 2: A Holy Place for Sword Cultivators

Ji Ning led Su Youji forwards alongside him as Daolord Fudan continued to introduce the people and places within the Sword Palace.

Boom!

The red-haired man sent his opponent flying with a single sword-strike. His gaze then fell upon Ji Ning, and his eyes instantly lit up. He laughed loudly, “Is this a new junior apprentice-brother of ours?”

“I am Darknorth. Greetings, senior apprentice-brother Wildfire,” Ning said.

“That explains it. I’ve sparred with and recognize everyone in our Sword Palace.” The red-haired man let out a loud, clear laugh. “Junior apprentice-brother Darknorth, since you are a new arrival I won’t disturb you, but in two days I’m going to go find you and have a little competition with you. I trust you won’t decline?”

“I’d be delighted to accept,” Ning said modestly.

“Mm. Go, go. We can chat later,” the red-haired man said.

Ning nodded.

As they moved past the red-haired man, Daolord Fudan said in a low voice, “Of the six exalted Swordlords, senior apprentice-brother Wildfire is the most heroic and straightforward. He loves to duel other cultivators and won’t look down upon weak ones. He’s a person who is easy to make friends with, and is much more approachable than many of the other World-level cultivators of the Sword Palace.”

Ning laughed. He could sense how friendly and relaxed this senior apprentice-brother Wildfire was.

A sword cultivator who was capable of breaking through to become a Samsara Daolord at any time would have a clear understanding of his own nature, be it good or bad, honorable or dishonorable. Wildfire clearly was

an extremely friendly and straightforward man, and his sword was similarly a sword that crushed all before it in an open and aboveboard manner.

“We are going to go to the Ancient Library next. It is right up ahead.” Daolord Fudan pointed towards a large, ancient-looking hall that was made of wood that was beginning to turn yellow with age. The entire ancient hall took up many kilometers, and just by looking at it Ning could sense the power of its aura.

“The Ancient Library was built alongside the Sword Palace itself. It has been around for an extremely, extremely long period of time,” Daolord Fudan explained.

“Eh?” Ning stared at it in amazement.

The Ancient Library had quite a few black-armored Daolords around it. Some were seated in the lotus position on the ground, some were relaxing and drinking wine, some were training with their swords. There were over a hundred of the present.

“Senior apprentice-brother Fudan.” Ning was puzzled. “On the way over, I saw quite a few black-armored Daolords. If we include in the ones before us, I’ve seen more than two hundred. But you told me that the entire Sword Palace only has a hundred Samsara Daolords...”

Daolord Fudan paused, a mixed look appearing on his face. “Let me explain.” He let out a sigh. “In the Sword Palace, all cultivators are like brothers. There’s not much of a difference in terms of status between us. World-level cultivators who run into Verge-level Daolords will simply address them as ‘senior apprentice-brother’.”

Ning nodded.

The Sword Palace was a place where elite sword cultivators gathered. Everyone treated everyone else in a fairly equal manner.

“But there’s still some differences, despite the overall equality,” Daolord Fudan said. “The cultivators in the Sword Palace are generally divided into two different types.”

“The first type consists of those who relied on themselves and their own insights to become Samsara Daolords! The six Swordlords are categorized along with them, even though they aren’t actually Samsara Daolords, because they can break through whenever they wish and possess tremendous potential. Once they break through, they will be far stronger than most Daolords of the First Step. This is why even Samsara Daolords treat these Swordlords as equals.

“The second type consists of the other World-level cultivators as well as black-armored Daolords like us.

“In the end, World-level cultivators are still just cultivators who have a chance of breaking through to become Daolords. They naturally have a somewhat lower status. As for us black-armored Daolords, all of us reached this level through using Pseudo Samsara Pills. We will forever remain at the First Step and have no hope of improving any further. There are even some freakishly strong World-level cultivators who are even stronger than us.” Daolord Fudan shook his head. “Some Samsara Daolords view us as the lowest of the low. They’d rather show kindness to World-level cultivators with potential than show us any real respect.”

Ning was silent. He could sense the sadness emanating from Daolord Fudan.

“In the Sword Palace, there are actually a total of more than 2300 black-armored Daolords,” Daolord Fudan said softly. “There are many more of them than there are World-level cultivators. There were quite a few people in the Brightshore Kingdom who became Daolords through using those pills, after all, and the almighty Hegemon has ordered that all Daolords must join the Twelve Palaces. This is why the Twelve Palaces has so many black-armored Daolords.”

Ning finally understood. The Sword Palace had more than two thousand black-armored Daolords, but just two hundred World-level cultivators and around a hundred ‘real’ Samsara Daolords. Given that they were fairly weak and had no prospects for future advancement, it wasn’t surprising that they had low statuses.

“Most of the black-armored Daolords are outside the Sword Palace, with just over five hundred staying inside of it,” Daolord Fudan said. “Although they are treated with some disdain, they still choose to remain within the Sword Palace because there, we will have a better chance to improve than we would anywhere else. Power depends on more factors than just enlightenment. Different sword-arts can also result in different levels of power, as do divine abilities and secret arts.”

Ning nodded. The [Novessence Thunder] was a great example of a very powerful secret art.

“They have a chance of earning those things in the Sword Palace, which is why so many remain within it,” Daolord Fudan said. “Come. I’ll take you to the Ancient Library for a look.”

They arrived at the Ancient Library.

“Is this a newcomer? You can come in. The one behind you cannot.” The two black-armored Daolords standing guard in front of the library looked at Ning.

Ning turned to glance at Su Youji, who was following him from behind.

“Youji, wait for me here,” Ning said.

“Alright.” Although Su Youji was quite curious, she didn’t really care because the Sword Palace was for those who walked the Dao of the Sword. For now, her path was the path of Feixian the Exalted. She was focusing on the path of charm and control, a completely different path from the Dao of the Sword.

Although the wooden floor and walls were protected by powerful formations, the unfeeling power of time had left its mark on them as well.

The ancient hall was incredibly large, and it was completely filled with bookshelves as far as the eye could see. Every single bookshelf was filled with many jade slips and scrolls.

“Eh?” Ning casually picked up a jade slip and sent his godsense into it. He immediately realized that it was filled with a large amount of information, and he accepted the information as it flowed into him.

“What a powerful sword-art.” Ning was rather shocked. This was a sword-art of tremendous power. In fact, it was just as strong as the [Nameless] sword-art. Alas, it was fragmentary and incomplete.

Ning couldn’t help but spend a bit of time reading through it before finally putting it back down.

“Don’t be impatient, junior apprentice-brother.” Only now did Daolord Fudan speak. “These sword-arts have been passed down since the most ancient of times. Some were left here by the almighty Hegemon while some were accumulated or created by the Sword Palace’s members over the course of countless years. In fact, when the other eleven palaces acquire new sword-arts they will often send them to us. We have tens of millions of sword-arts placed here, all of which are at least at the Daolord level.”

“Tens of millions of scrolls?” Ning was speechless.

“The problem is, 99% of them are fragmentary and incomplete,” Daolord Fudan said. “The ones on these bookshelves here are all fragmentary. The ones placed on the tables at the very front are all complete, with teachings that will guide you from the early stages to the late stages. That way, you can slowly train in them step by step. The tables have over five hundred thousand techniques.”

Tens of millions of incomplete techniques?

More than five hundred thousand complete techniques?

“Some of these sword-arts are strong, some are weak. Some were left behind by Eternal Emperors, while some were acquired by the almighty Hegemon by happenstance and possess incalculable power.” Daolord Fudan smiled.

“Are there any limitations or restrictions on learning these sword-arts?” Ning was worried.

“None.” Daolord Fudan sighed with emotion. “Any member of the Sword Palace is permitted to freely study any of the scrolls and slips here.”

Ning sighed in amazement as well.

As he walked through the Ancient Library and saw the many jade slips that had been placed here for countless chaos cycles, he couldn't help but occasionally reach out to grab a scroll to take a look. Even the fragmentary ones were incredibly profound. If he was to give them to the Fogstone Dominion, they would be treated as supreme techniques.

Any technique placed within the Ancient Library of the Sword Palace had to be at least at the Daolord level.

"Simply incredible." Ning sighed with amazement. He even saw a silver-armored Daolord seated in the lotus position, silently meditating on a sword-art.

"There are simply too many sword-arts here," Daolord Fudan said. "Some of them, especially profound ones such as the ones left behind by Eternal Emperors, will take countless years to learn. There are so many sword-arts here that no one can truly learn them all. They will at most flip through some and try to gain some experience."

Ning was incredibly excited. His Dao of the Sword required him to understand the true essence of the sword by analyzing and dissecting many different sword-arts. This place was an absolute treasure trove for him.

"The Ancient Library is actually considered a fairly 'ordinary' place here in the Sword Palace." Daolord Fudan let out a secretive smile. "It doesn't even rank as one of the top three places here in the Sword Palace."

"Ah?!" Ning was stunned.

As Ning saw it, the Ancient Library was already sacred grounds for those who trained in the sword. And yet, it didn't even rank as one of the top three places in the Sword Palace?

"Come. I'll take you to another place," Daolord Fudan said. "You'll understand once you get there."

# Chapter 3: The Forest of Sword Pagodas

Ji Ning and Su Youji followed Daolord Fudan in flying through a mountainous forest grove.

Every so often, one would be able to see the residences of cultivators spread out throughout the mountains. Daolord Fudan suddenly pointed off into the distance towards a distant valley. “That place is known as Armaments Gorge. That’s another one of the very important places in the Sword Palace. It is just as important as the Ancient Library.”

“Armaments Gorge?” Ning stared off into the distance, as did the nearby Su Youji. None of this really had anything to do with her, but it was a chance for her to learn a few things.

Distant buildings could be seen hidden throughout the gorge, with some located deep in the very bottom.

“Armaments Gorge is filled with many weapons, magic treasures, and unique artifacts,” Daolord Fudan said. “The weapons here are primarily swords of all shapes and sizes, but there are also many types of other magic treasures, including pills. All treasures are stored here.”

Ning’s eyes lit up. All treasures were stored here? Would perhaps Mirrorsnow Paintings be stored here as well?

“What must be done if I wish to acquire some of those treasures?” Ning said.

“The treasures inside Armaments Gorge were accumulated by the Sword Palace over the course of countless years. They cannot be taken away without paying a cost,” Daolord Fudan said. “If everyone just took away treasures as they pleased, the gorge would soon be completely emptied. When you are free, you can go and take a look. The Armaments Gorge has certain rules that govern it. Still, in the outside world, many of these treasures are completely unobtainable no matter what price you are willing to pay. At least they are available in the Armaments Gorge.”

Ning nodded. The more valuable a treasure was, the harder it would be

to acquire it. Daolord Solesky had been willing to risk his own life and pay a heavy price in order to get Daolord Badlands to help him in his quest to obtain a certain treasure. It seemed as though the Armaments Gorge had many priceless treasures within it.

“The Ancient Library is filled with sword-arts, while this place is filled with treasures.” Ning nodded. These two places truly were on par with each other.

“Next, I shall take you to the third-most important place we have.” Daolord Fudan continued to fly forwards, leading Ning higher and higher into the skies.

“Look over there.” Daolord Fudan pointed at the tallest building in the entire Sword Palace. It was a strangely shaped building that was shaped like a towering pillar of cloud layers. Each layer was thirty thousand meters tall. The first layer was formed of black clouds, the second layer was formed of azure clouds, the third layer was formed of silvery-white clouds, and the highest layer was formed from golden clouds.

The four layers of clouds came together to form this towering edifice that was at the heart of the entire Sword Palace.

“This is the Daolord Cloudworld.” Daolord Fudan sighed. “This is one of the most important places in the entire Sword Palace, ranking within the top three.”

“What is it for?” Ning was puzzled.

“The Daolord Cloudworld is filled with many powerful golem opponents, and more than 90% of them wield swords. They will use different types of sword-arts, with the strongest ones being comparable to the sword-arts used by Daolords of the Third Step.” Daolord Fudan sighed. “Sword cultivators need combat more than anything else, and battles against other supremely skilled swordsmen help more than anything else.”

Ning absolutely agreed with this comment. One of the reasons why his sword-arts had improved so quickly was because he had been able to duel those three powerful swordsmen within the three Mirrorsnow Paintings. That had been of tremendous benefit to him.

“When you battle against other supremely skilled swordsmen, not only will you have a chance to discover the flaws in your own sword-arts, you’ll also learn from the sword-arts they used.” Daolord Fudan sighed.

“However, battling against such powerful swordsmen in the outside world carries the risk of death. In the Daolord Cloudworld, however, you won’t be at any risk of dying. The Daolord Cloudworld has many golems because the entire Sword Palace has put tremendous resources into it over the course of countless years. That’s why it has so many golems of such incredible power.”

Ning nodded. There were quite a few cultivators who had sword-arts on the level of most Daolords of the Third Step, but creating a golem that possessed the same level of sword-arts would carry a tremendous price that even Eternal Emperors would feel pain upon paying. Generally speaking, powerful golems relied on using overwhelming speed and power, with their weakness being their insights into the Dao. This was even true for golems who could battle Verge-level Daolords.

Golems weren’t cultivators, after all. They were innately weak in this respect.

“There are many powerful expert swordsmen there who all use different types of sword-arts, some of which are comparable to Daolords of the Third Step.” Daolord Fudan sighed. “Which cultivator of the sword wouldn’t dream of gaining access to such a place as we have here in the Palace of the Sword?”

Ning was growing even more excited. No wonder the Sword Palace was able to give birth to six freakishly strong World-level cultivators like the six Swordlords!

“And there’s more! Remember, the Daolord Cloudworld has a total of four layers,” Daolord Fudan said. “The Blackcloud World is the first layer; if you overcome it, you will be awarded a set of black armor. This black armor is merely a top-grade Dao armor. The Azurecloud World is the second layer, and if you overcome it you’ll be given azure armor. The Silvercloud World is the third layer, and if you overcome it you’ll be awarded silver armor. The highest layer is the Goldcloud World, and if you

overcome it you will be awarded golden armor. The azure armor, silver armor, and gold armor are all Eternal treasures of different levels of power. The suits of golden armor are top-grade Eternal treasures, and they possess many marvelous properties.

“Being able to acquire the black armor means you have reached the threshold of a Daolord of the First Step.

“Being able to acquire the azure armor means you have reached the threshold of a Daolord of the Second Step.

“Silver armor is for those who have reached the threshold of Daolords of the Third Step.

“Golden armor belongs to those who have reached the threshold for Daolords of the Fourth Step.”

Daolord Fudan explained the stages one by one.

Ning nodded. ‘Reached the threshold’ simply meant that you were at the minimum level of power for that level. When Ning had first broken through to the World-level, he had reached the threshold of a Daolord of the First Step. As for right now? He was comparable to an average Daolord of the First Step.

“In the Sword Palace, we have eight World-level cultivators who have won azure armor,” Daolord Fudan said softly.

“What?” Ning was shocked.

Although he was fairly powerful, he didn’t think he had reached the threshold of a Daolord of the Second Step. But the Sword Palace had eight such figures?

“Five of them are special lifeforms while three of them were cultivators, but even the cultivators have freakishly powerful divine abilities or secret arts,” Daolord Fudan explained. “In challenging the Daolord Cloudworld, you can use all abilities and techniques that you have available, such as divine abilities and secret arts. But of course, you can’t use certain single-use treasures, Dao-seals, bugbeasts, golems, or other similar treasures.”

“Don’t be too surprised. Divine abilities and secrets are can be tremendously powerful,” Daolord Fudan said. “I’ll take you to another place now.”

Daolord Fudan led him to a bamboo hall erected at the peak of a mountain which was wreathed in clouds and mist.

“This is the Pavilion of Mysteries.” Daolord Fudan pointed at the bamboo hall. “It is filled with many divine abilities, secret arts, and a few legacies left behind by ancient powers of the Dao of the Sword. Divine abilities can increase your strength a hundredfold, while secret arts are even more difficult to gauge. The strongest secret arts can unleash utterly terrifying levels of power,” Daolord Fudan said.

Ning nodded. His own [Novessence Thunder] technique was classified as a secret art! Certain incredibly powerful secret arts truly could allow the wielder to challenge cultivators who were at a higher level of power. If some of the freakishly strong World-level cultivators like Kilostar gained access to some of the terrifyingly strong secret arts or treasures the Twelve Palaces had to offer, it was entirely possible that he would be able to battle his way through the second layer of the Daolord Cloudworld and earn the azure armor.

However, if you had merely reached the threshold of the Second Step as a Daolord, you would probably be defeated in one blow by a true Daolord of the Second Step. Still, you would probably be strong enough to kill most Daolords of the First Step.

“Many of the divine abilities and secret arts stored in this place were left behind by Daolords who were comparable to Eternal Emperors in might. Some were left behind by actual Eternal Emperors. The same is true for the full legacies,” Daolord Fudan said. “However, the full legacies are fewer in number.”

Ning nodded.

Legacies were completely different from the sword-arts held within the Ancient Library.

To have a legacy was to essentially have a master. Not only did a legacy

include many sword-arts and detailed instructions on learning them, it would often include a detailed analysis and explanation of every single stance from the Daolord who had left the legacy behind. To have a Samsara Daolord guide you step by step on your path... true legacies were thousands of times more valuable than mere sword-arts.

Take the [Nameless] sword-art which World God Northrest had transmitted to Ning. Its first five stances all had their own sword-intents, but Northrest himself had never learned the sixth or seventh stance. All he had been able to do was to leave behind a record of the stances.

This was the flaw of the Ancient Library. Its sword-arts consisted of nothing more than movements and techniques; there was no sword-intent for the cultivator to attune to.

“Every newcomer is permitted to choose a single thing from the Pavilion of Mysteries,” Daolord Fudan said. “The Daolord Cloudworld and the Pavilion of Mysteries are two of the top three sacred areas here in the Sword Palace. Now... I am going to take you to the most important place of all, the indisputably most sacred place.”

They continued to fly forwards, moving towards the very rear of the Sword Palace.

“There. Right there.” Daolord Fudan pointed off into the distance, towards a place which was covered in darkness. The black earth was filled with erect towers, and the towers filled the landscape like a forest or like a sea. Every single tower emanated an aura of incredible sword-intent which filled the entire region.

A million chaos cycles or even longer might go by... but the sword-intent here would never dissipate.

“Ever since the Sword Palace was established, every single person whose sword-arts are acknowledged by the Sword Pagodas shall leave behind a Sword Pagoda of his own,” Daolord Fudan said softly. “To be acknowledged by the Sword Pagodas, you have to at least reach the level of the six Swordlords. Over the course of countless years, every single true Samsara Daolord or Eternal Emperor has left behind a Sword Pagoda that

belongs to them. Every single Sword Pagoda holds the sword-arts they learned and developed. They personally recorded those sword-arts down and left them here, infusing their pagoda with their sword-intent.

“Countless Daolords have died since the Sword Palace was founded, and even Eternal Emperors have disappeared into the endless darkness as they went out exploring parts unknown. Their Sword Pagodas, however, have been kept safe.

“There are a total of 83612 Sword Pagodas here!

“This place represents the greatest wealth, the greatest fortune the Sword Palace possesses. This is the most sacred place in the entire palace.” A look of awe and veneration was in Daolord Fudan’s eyes.

Ning could sense that the sword-intents here were incredibly ancient, having existed for countless chaos cycles. In fact, some of the sword-intents were absolutely lawless and dominating. These sword-intents had all been left behind by some of the most supremely talented cultivators of the Endless Territories, many of whom were capable of battling Eternal Emperors or actually were Eternal Emperors. All of them had been gathered here... and every single Sword Pagoda represented an ancient power.

Samsara Daolords. With each step they took, they walked the tightrope which existed between life and death. Daolords had to eventually succeed in the Daomerge, as they would otherwise die one day. Some of the earliest Daolords had already perished, but their sword-arts and their sword-intents had been left behind and would forever exist.

“The most sacred place of the Sword Palace... the Forest of Sword Pagodas.” Daolord Fudan’s voice was trembling slightly. He dreamed of one day being able to leave behind a Sword Pagoda of his own... but alas, his sword-arts were not good enough.

# Chapter 4: Palace Lord Woodflower

Ji Ning stared off into the distance, where he could vaguely see quite a few figures seated in the lotus position within those ancient, enormous Sword Pagodas.

“All members of the Sword Palace are permitted to come here and meditate,” Daolord Fudan said. “Even we black-armored Daolords are permitted.”

“I’m going to take a look.” Ning walked forwards.

The Sword Pagodas were tall and erect, with each emanating a completely different sword-intent. It was as though mighty sword practitioners were standing right next to Ning! As Ning walked through the ancient Forest of Sword Pagodas, he felt as though he was walking through a sea of time. As Ning stared at the mighty sword-arts and sword-intents which the ancient powers had left behind, he couldn’t help but feel utterly stunned.

These were his predecessors, ancient masters of the Dao of the Sword.

The Sword Pagodas had more than just sword-arts. Many also had a few tiny words carved into them.

Ning’s gaze turned towards one particular Sword Pagoda. The sword-arts inscribed within this Sword Pagoda were quite similar to his own [Nameless] sword-art. They belonged to the same general style of swordsmanship, and they were similarly exalted and profound. As for the sword-intent, it was awe-inspiringly profound and seemed to encompass all things.

Daolord Everstarter. After joining our Sword Palace, he received the acknowledgment of the Sword Pagodas while still at the World level and became one of our Swordlords. He had a modest disposition and liked to teach his juniors and those weaker than him. He treated the Sword Palace as his home and rarely went out adventuring. Silently and without any fanfare, he reached the Fourth Step as a Daolord. However, because the Ancient cultivators went too far in their actions, Daolord Everstarter

ventured forth all by himself and unveiled his utterly terrifying sword-arts, defeating three other Verge-level Daolords who were Ancient cultivators. In fact, he even defeated an Ancient cultivator who was an Eternal Emperor."

"This battle brought him tremendous fame, and he became acknowledged as the number one Daolord of the Endless Territories in his time. Afterwards, as he prepared for his Daomerge, he began to travel to many different places. Ever since then, we have received no word of him. We do not know if he is alive or dead.

Ning was speechless.

This Daolord defeated an Eternal Emperor who was an Ancient cultivator?

Ning knew very little about the Ancient cultivators. All he knew was that they were incredibly, terrifyingly powerful. Only the most supreme of special lifeforms were comparable to Ancient cultivators. Eternal Emperors who were Ancient cultivators were definitely far more powerful than ordinary Eternal Emperors. A Daolord had actually defeated one of them? No wonder he was publicly acclaimed as the number one Daolord in his time.

This feat was far more impressive than Daolord Allgod's feat of attacking and pursuing Emperor Melobo.

"No one knows if Daolord Everstarter is still alive or not." Suddenly, a voice rang out.

Ning was startled. Someone had appeared behind him without him even noticing?

He hurriedly turned and looked backwards, only to see that a golden-armored, tousled-hair, and rather decadent-looking man had appeared behind him.

"Greetings, senior apprentice-brother." Upon seeing the suit of golden armor, Ning immediately addressed the man with respect.

There were no 'masters' or 'apprentices' here in the Sword Palace, only

brothers and sisters.

At this moment, Daolord Fudan hurriedly ran over and said with great respect, “Greetings, Lord Woodflower.”

“Lord?” Ning was stunned.

“Junior apprentice-brother Darknorth, Daolord Woodflower is a Vice Palace Lord of our Sword Palace.” Daolord Fudan sent a hurried mental message to Ning.

Although Ning didn’t know the names of the various Daolords in the Sword Palace, he knew the general rules of the Twelve Palaces. The strongest member in every single palace was given the title of Palace Lord. Vice Palace Lords were the next most powerful! But of course, there were exceptions such as the Palace of Radiance, which had two powerful Daolords who were roughly on par with each other, which was why both were referred to as Palace Lord. Thus, the Radiant Palace had two Palace Lords.

Generally speaking, Palace Lords and Vice Palace Lords had the power to battle against Eternal Emperors. This was especially true in a place like the Sword Palace, which focused on combat.

“Greetings, Palace Lord,” Ning said hurriedly.

“Simply address me as senior apprentice-brother Woodflower.” The decadent-looking man chuckled. “I watched the battle between you and Bertulu. You aren’t bad at all. Actually, your sword-arts are quite similar to those of Daolord Everstarter. If he is still alive, he should be an Eternal Emperor by now. Given how strong he was as a Daolord, as an Eternal Emperor he would probably be alive to this very day and might be willing to give you some personal pointers.”

Ning nodded.

A Daolord who was able to defeat an Eternal Emperor of the Ancients and who was acknowledged as the undisputed number one Daolord of the Endless Territories of his time... if he was to become an Eternal Emperor, killing him would be almost impossible.

“Senior apprentice-brother Woodflower,” Ning said hurriedly, “Can it be that he doesn’t have an avatar here? Why is it that we don’t know if he is alive or not?”

When Ning had entered Undermoon Lake, he had been quite weak, but his clones in the outside world could sense if he was alive or dead. Once his clones in Undermoon Lake perished, he would be able to recreate the clones in the outside world. This was an easy way to judge if he was dead or not.

Daolords, however, would generally leave avatars in their homes when they were entering dangerous regions. If not, they would leave behind other special techniques or spells. Generally speaking, it wasn’t too hard to know what was happening or if they were still alive.

“The primordial chaos is vast and endless. Even the almighty Hegemon, who is older than the Twelve Palaces, wouldn’t dare claim that he knows everything which happens within it,” Lord Woodflower explained. “In the endless primordial chaos, there are indeed some places which will result in you being completely cut off from the outside world once you enter. There would be no way whatsoever to ascertain if you were alive or not.”

“Given that we have heard no word from him in countless years, it is very likely that he is dead. However, there’s no way to verify it, and so we generally will list these elders as ‘status unknown’ rather than ‘deceased’ on their Sword Pagodas,” Lord Woodflower explained.

Ning nodded.

After chatting a bit about Daolord Everstarter, Lord Woodflower said, “Darknorth, as a new member of the Sword Palace, you are able to choose a single divine ability, secret art, or legacy from the Pavilion of Mysteries. But of course, some Daolords restricted their legacies, only permitting juniors who passed the trials they set down to make use of those legacies. Generally speaking, the more valuable a legacy, the more common this practice is.”

Ning naturally understood this principle. His Mirrorsnow Paintings had trials as well. Actually procuring all four paintings was a major trial in and

of itself, and of course he had to defeat the four experts within the four paintings.

“I’ll go take a look first,” Ning said.

“I’ll lead the way.” Lord Woodflower waved his hand, sending a surge of Immortal energy to surround Ning.

Sword-light flickered around them, resulting in them disappearing into the skies.

Daolord Fudan raised his head to watch them leave, a look of envy in his eyes. He murmured softly, “Lord Woodflower is quite nice to him. It seems he views Darknorth with great favor.” As he spoke, he walked back to the outskirts of the Forest of Sword Pagodas.

“Who was that person who just flew away with my master?” Su Youji immediately asked.

“That was Lord Woodflower of our Sword Palace. Although he behaves in a very casual, laid-back manner, he’s a very discerning man. It isn’t easy to attract his attention. It seems he quite likes your master,” Daolord Fudan said. “Let us wait for him here.”

“Alright.” Su Youji smiled. The better Ning’s live here was, the happier she would be. She felt absolutely delighted by this.

.....

The Pavilion of Mysteries was located at the top of a mountain, surrounded by clouds and mist.

A streak of sword-light flickered and descended in front of the pavilion. Daolord Woodflower and Ji Ning both appeared once more.

“That was fast.” Ning was secretly shocked.

“Greetings, Vice Palace Lord.” Suddenly, a fiery red golem at the entrance to the pavilion rose to its feet and called out respectfully. Its entire body was made from magic treasures; a simple glance was enough to tell that it wasn’t an actual living creature.

“Swordthree, I’m going to take this new arrival of ours, junior

apprentice-brother Darknorth, in for a look.” Daolord Woodflower smiled towards Ning. “This is Swordthree, the overseer of the Pavilion of Mysteries. He’s been guarding this place for an extremely long period of time, much longer than any of our Daolords have been alive. He is ranked the third most powerful golem in the Sword Palace, and so we just call him Swordthree. You can call him the same.”

“Swordthree,” Ning said hurriedly.

“Darknorth.” The fiery golem cracked a friendly smile towards Ning.

“Follow me inside.” Lord Woodflower led Ning inwards.

Within this bamboo hall, there were a series of jade slips. There were also stone steles, statues, books, paintings, leaves, wine gourds, and all sorts of other items. They all looked quite ordinary, as though this was a flea market filled with many miscellaneous objects.

“This place holds many divine abilities and secret arts,” Lord Woodflower said. “All Twelve Palaces share more or less the same divine abilities and secret arts. Our legacies, however, belong to us alone.”

Lord Woodflower continued, “There are differences amongst the legacies. Some are more profound, some are less. Some were left behind by fairly ordinary Daolords, some were left behind by awe-inspiringly powerful Daolords who were as strong as Eternal Emperors, and some were left behind by actual Eternal Emperors. There’s no need to pass any trials to use the divine abilities or secret arts; all you need to do is choose one and you will be able to train in it. Legacies, however, generally come attached with trials and conditions.”

“The legacies left behind by Eternal Emperors are the most valuable. Here within this bamboo hall, there are five legacies that were left behind by Eternal Emperors.” Lord Woodflower explained, “Here in the Sword Palace, we have an additional requirement. World-level cultivators have to become acknowledged as ‘Swordlords’ by the Sword Pagodas before they are qualified to select a legacy left behind by an Eternal Emperor... but of course, they still need to pass the trials which the Eternal Emperor set down.”

Ning said with surprise, “Don’t some of those freakishly powerful Daolords possess sword-arts that equal the sword-arts of Eternal Emperors? Why is it that the legacies of the Eternal Emperors are so much harder to obtain?”

“Anyone who was able to become an Eternal Emperor had already perfected his Dao of the Sword to a level where it could gain eternity,” Lord Woodflower explained. “These legacies will give you experience that will help guide you to eternity. Over the course of countless years, we have seen several freakishly strong Daolords in every single generation. However, very few of them are ever able to become actual Eternal Emperors.”

Lord Woodflower continued, “Based on the rough numbers we have for the Endless Territories, less than one in a hundred thousand Daolords shall become an Eternal Emperor. Although our Sword Palace is assisted by the almighty Hegemon and selects only the cream of the crop, the elites of the elites, we’ve only given birth to a total of three Eternal Emperors since the establishment of the kingdom.”

Lord Woodflower shook his head. “Of the three Eternal Emperors... one perished, while the other two were solitary figures who went off wandering by themselves.” Lord Woodflower let out a sigh. “Our ratio of Daolords to Eternal Emperors is actually fairly high. The Dao Alliance has a much lower ratio than the Twelve Palaces.”

Ning was speechless. At present, the Sword Palace didn’t even have a single Eternal Emperor?

“It’s simply too hard for a new Eternal Emperor to be born. Even if one is born... they live far too long and easily grow bored, and so they often delight in exploring places which no one has ever been before. Sometimes, they never come back.” Lord Woodflower continued, “As for the freakishly strong Daolords... after they fail their Daomerge, they know that they shall die and so they will often go out and try to find chances to slay Eternal Emperors belonging to enemy organizations.”

“Although there aren’t that many freakishly strong Daolords, there’s

usually a few in every generation. Although Eternal Emperors are untouched by the ravages of time, they can still perish through other means,” Lord Woodflower explained. “But of course, there are always differences. Take our almighty Hegemon. He’s actually an Eternal Emperor, but he’s just far, far too powerful. As a result, he’s still alive to this very day. Even though he occasionally abducts World-level cultivators who belong to other organizations, they just ignore it and pretend not to see it.”

Ning let out a sigh.

What sad, sad fates these Eternal Emperors had. They were incredibly rare in number, but the freakishly strong Daolords who failed their Daomerge would often target them in suicidal attacks. Daolord Allgod was a good example. After he failed his Daomerge, he attempted to chase down and kill Emperor Melobo.

Far too many Eternal Emperors disappeared while adventuring, were slain by Daolords, or went into hiding. Only truly almighty figures like the Hegemon were capable of staying alive.

“As a result, there are very few legacies that were left behind by Eternal Emperors. Even the weakest Eternal Emperor’s sword-arts are comparable to the sword-arts of supreme Daolords, and they contain a hint of eternity...” Lord Woodflower looked at Ning. “I’m sure you know this, but cultivators must find and walk their own paths. After becoming a Daolord, you must develop a sword-art all your own. These so-called ‘legacies’ are mainly valuable because they will help guide you in that.”

Ning nodded.

“By now, you should understand why the legacies left behind by Eternal Emperors are so rare and valuable,” Lord Woodflower said. “I urge you to do your best to acquire one of them if you can. But of course, it is up to you. What do you want? A divine ability, a secret art, or a legacy? What will you choose?”

“What will I choose?” Ning began to ponder this question.

# Chapter 5: Hope

A divine ability? Ji Ning's greatest advantage was his azureflower mist energy, but there was no way to use it to execute divine abilities. For now, his [Golden Idol] and [Three Heads, Six Arms] were enough.

A legacy? He was still missing the fourth Mirrorsnow Painting for the legacy of Emperor Mirrorsnow.

"Senior apprentice-brother Woodflower," Ning said.

"Have you made your decision?" Lord Woodflower looked at Ning. "There's no need to choose right away. Think it over. You'll only have one opportunity to pick something of your choosing. After that, you'll have to pay a heavy price."

"I actually want to ask a question. Is it possible for the Twelve Palaces to acquire a copy of the fourth Mirrorsnow Painting?" Ning asked.

"You already have the first three?" Lord Woodflower was surprised.

"Yes." Ning nodded. There was no need to hide this; the Sword Palace had many legacies, and Lord Woodflower himself was a supremely strong Daolord who was comparable to Eternal Emperors in power.

"I don't think the Sword Palace has a copy." Lord Woodflower pondered for a moment, then let out a laugh. "Later, you should go to the Armaments Gorge and take a look for yourself. If they really don't have a copy, you can ask them to help out. They'll help you find a fourth copy in the Endless Territories. Given the might of the Twelve Palaces, I trust that they shouldn't find this to be an overly difficult task. But of course, you'll need to pay for it."

"Understood." Ning relaxed slightly.

"Emperor Mirrorsnow was an extremely powerful Eternal Emperor, and he's still alive." Lord Woodflower let out a sigh. "His legacy is an excellent one."

Ning suddenly gave voice to something which had been puzzling him. "Senior apprentice-brother Woodflower, there's something which has

been bothering me. Advancing from the Samsara Daolord level to the Eternal Emperor level should represent an incredible increase in power... and I would imagine that anyone capable of becoming an Eternal Emperor should be have been an extraordinary Daolord as well. Why, then, do I often hear about Daolords slaying Emperors?"

Lord Woodflower was startled, and a complicated look appeared on his face.

"You were going to be told about this eventually." Lord Woodflower looked at Ning. "Samsara Daolords all have their own paths, and different paths will result in different levels of difficulty in becoming Eternal Emperors.

"If you choose a simple path, you will be fairly weak amongst your peers. As a Daolord of the Fourth Step, you probably won't be as strong as I was when I was a Daolord of the Third Step. However... that will also make it somewhat easier for you on your road to gaining eternity.

"If you choose a difficult path, you will be extremely powerful. As a Daolord of the Fourth Step, you might even be able to slay some of the weaker Eternal Emperors. However... to succeed in your Daomerge on this difficult path and gain eternity will be even more difficult."

Lord Woodflower looked at Ning. "That is why there's an old axiom that has rung true for countless chaos cycles... the more powerful the Daolord, the less likely he will be successful in his Daomerge."

"The many freakishly strong Daolords that have appeared over the course of countless years have almost all failed in their Daomerge. Thus, junior apprentice-brother Darknorth... you need to think over what path you would like to take. Shall you choose a path that is a simple one? Or a path that is a difficult one?" Lord Woodflower looked at Ning. "The difficult path means that it is guaranteed that every single step you take as a Daolord will be very dangerous, and your Daomerge will be even more difficult! However, you'll also be incredibly powerful and will be a dazzling figure amongst your peers. The simple path will be easier to walk, and in the end you will have a slightly larger chance of completing your

Daomerge and gaining eternity.”

Ning was stunned by this revelation.

Still... it made sense. He himself had already found the direction in which his Dao of the Sword would lead. His path involved analyzing and dissecting all sword-arts he encountered in order to better understand the fundamental essence of the sword. His goal was to infuse all of the mysteries of all sword-arts into his own Dao of the Sword.

This path was an insanely ambitious one. To understand the fundamental essence of the sword and to absorb all of its mysteries meant that in the end, he would have developed what could be described as an ‘ultimate’, perfect sword-art.

Perfection was not so easily achieved.

Ning had chosen an extremely difficult path. In truth, Ning could’ve chosen to walk a simpler path. For example, right now Ning was extremely skilled in defensive techniques. If he focused all his efforts on defense, things would be much easier for him.

“Why should cultivators fear difficulties?” Ning laughed. “Even if you choose the simpler path, perhaps less than one in a hundred thousand Samsara Daolords shall gain eternity. It is best to follow your own heart and embark upon a path which is hard but glorious. That way, if you do become an Eternal Emperor, you’ll be truly invincible and will have nothing and no one to be afraid of.”

“Right!” Lord Woodflower laughed loudly. “In the Endless Territories, there are three almighty Hegemons. All three were freakishly powerful Daolords who were capable of slaying Eternal Emperors, and they eventually were successful in breaking through to become Eternal Emperors. After they made their breakthroughs, no one has ever been able to shake them and their positions. To show our respect for them and in order to differentiate them from ordinary Emperors, we revere with them the title of ‘Hegemon’. The almighty Hegemony of our own Brightshore Kingdom is one of the three, and he has been alive for far longer than our Twelve Palaces have existed.”

Ning nodded. A thought suddenly flashed through his mind, causing him to take a deep breath before asking the question which he cared about more than all other questions. “Senior apprentice-brother Woodflower... if a truesoul is destroyed, is the almighty Hegemon capable of reversing time to save it?”

In terms of mastery over spacetime, it was possible that the almighty Hegemon was second to none in all the Endless Territories. Would it be possible for him to reverse the flow of spacetime and rescue Yu Wei?

Lord Woodflower was startled. He gave Ning a hard look. “In the Endless Territories, there is indeed a legend that says it is possible to invert spacetime itself, allowing you to reach out into the distant past and bring back to life a person whose truesoul has already been destroyed in the present day. However, I’ve heard that the person who uses this technique would have to pay an utterly ruinous price. I don’t know if the almighty Hegemon can accomplish this task, but even if he truly can he wouldn’t make it public. To invert spacetime and rescue a truesoul from the distant past is something which would probably cause him to suffer heavy injuries. There’s no way he would make something like this public.”

Lord Woodflower continued to look at Ning. “Still... it is indeed true that if you can reach a profound enough level of insight, you can invert spacetime and bring someone back to life. However, it will be so difficult that very few of the ancient powers capable of doing it would actually be willing to carry it out.”

“Understood.” Ning felt excited.

Hope.

He finally saw some hope!

Ning had always clung onto a dream which even he knew was unlikely. He had felt that theoretically, someone who had reached certain incredible heights in the manipulation of spacetime should be able to invert it and reach into the past to save a deceased truesoul. However, there was no proof backing up this theory of his... but today, Lord Woodflower had personally verified that this was indeed possible. And in fact, the almighty

Hegemon might be someone who was capable of such a thing.

But of course, if Ning wasn't able to offer enough of an incentive and pay enough of a price, there was no way he would be able to convince the almighty Hegemon to do such a thing.

"Senior apprentice-sister. We will definitely be able to meet each other once again. I don't care how long it takes. I'm going to work hard until the day I see you again."

Ning closed his eyes. When he imagined that day in the distant future, he felt as though he could see Yu Wei smiling at him from afar. Ning felt a warmth spread into his heart, filling him with strength and resolve.

Ning opened his eyes. "Thank you, senior apprentice-brother Woodflower."

Lord Woodflower nodded. "Take some time and consider your choices. If you have any questions regarding the Dao of the Sword, you can go find me in my estate."

"Thank you, senior apprentice-brother Woodflower." Ning could sense Lord Woodflower's goodwill and felt quite grateful towards the man.

Lord Woodflower left, allowing Ning to search through the Pavilion of Mysteries by himself.

"The Windsmoke secret art. The normal price is five hundred thousand cubes of chaos nectar, and it involves..."

"The Endless Dark divine ability. The normal price is three hundred thousand cubes of chaos nectar..."

These divine abilities and secret arts all had a simple explanation regarding how much one had to pay in chaos nectar in order to purchase them. The cheapest started off at a hundred thousand cubes, while the most expensive was as high as three million cubes. Even for Daolords, these techniques were truly consummate, killer techniques. Only in a place like the Sword Palace could one easily gain access to them. In the outside world? Acquiring such techniques would be far more difficult.

“Eh?” Ning was stunned.

“Novessence Fire, a million cubes of chaos nectar. This secret art was developed by Daolord Allgod...

“Novessence Water, a million cubes of chaos nectar...

Ning found five consecutive secret arts which had been developed by Daolord Allgod.

“They even have Daolord Allgod’s techniques?” Ning was rather surprised. The five secret arts he found were the [Novessence Fire], [Novessence Water], [Novessence Earth], [Novessence Wood], and [Novessence Metal] techniques.

Ning carefully read through the other secrets arts following them, only to find nothing else.

Curious, Ning hurriedly ran over to the entrance to the Pavilion of Mysteries.

“Have you chosen, Darknorth?” The guardian golem, Swordthree, looked at Ning.

“I saw five of the secret arts left behind by Daolord Allgod,” Ning said. “But I heard that Daolord Allgod actually had nine in total?”

“Right. Daolord Allgod was an astonishingly talented man who was skilled in alchemy, artificing, rearing bugbeasts, and more. He was a master of many different skills, and so he was an exceptional developer of secret arts as well. He created nine mighty secret arts, and when those nine secret arts came together they were able to unleash utterly shocking levels of power. Unfortunately, the Dao Alliance completely refuses to give us the entire thing.” Swordthree shook his head. “The almighty Hegemon made a personal appearance and paid a considerable price, but was still only able to convince the Dao Alliance to give us five of the secret arts belonging to Daolord Allgod. The four remaining secret arts were even more powerful, but we weren’t able to acquire them.”

Now Ning understood.

Ning had already come to a decision, but to be careful he still reviewed the basic descriptions of all the divine abilities and secret arts in the entire Pavilion of Mysteries.

Each of the five secret arts of Daolord Allgod cost a million cubes of chaos nectar, and every single one of those secret arts was enough to slay weak Daolords of the Fourth Step. These were terrifying killer techniques.

“Aside from the Dao of the Sword, I have some affinity for lightning, water, and space. Lightning and water resonate with each other and can support each other.” These were two naturally aligned elements.

“The nine secret arts of Daolord Allgod were meant to be used together in a combination. I shall choose the [Novessence Water] secret art.” Ning quickly made up his mind.

“Are you certain you wish to choose the [Novessence Water] secret art?” Swordthree looked at Ning. “To tell you the truth, legacies are more important for World-level cultivators.”

“I am certain.” Ning nodded.

“Alright.” Swordthree easily dispersed the restrictive spell covering the jade slip. “Go ahead and learn it.”

Ning sent his senses into the slip, immediately swearing the relevant lifeblood oath and beginning to study the technique.

Although the [Novessence Water] was very powerful, it was more of a soft, subtle technique. By contrast, the [Novessence Thunder] was a more dominating, destructive technique.

Of the nine secret arts, the five pertaining to metal, wood, water, fire, and earth were slightly weaker, whereas the [Novessence Thunder], [Novessence Light], and the other two were slightly stronger.

“Time to go to the Armaments Gorge.” After learning the secret art, Ning departed from the Pavilion of Mysteries and headed towards the Armaments Gorge. He had to acquire the fourth Mirrorsnow Painting as soon as possible.

# Chapter 6: Broken Sword?

Ji Ning hovered there in midair, staring downwards at the Armaments Gorge. He then immediately flew downwards and landed in front of an icy building that was erected within the gorge. This was the true Armaments Gorge.

There were two golems guarding the gates to the building.

“Darknorth greets you,” Ning said courteously.

“Swordfive.”

“Swordsix.”

The two golems introduced themselves. They both had stately, solemn auras of tremendous power.

Ning walked past the gates, and the two golems let him enter unimpeded. Although there were many weapons and treasures stored here, not even Eternal Emperors were strong enough to seize them by force. The formations surrounding the most important parts of the Twelve Palaces had been personally established long ago by the almighty Hegemon himself, and the successive generations of geniuses in the Twelve Palaces had repeatedly strengthened them and reinforced them. By now, there were few to none in all the Endless Territories capable of breaking inside.

“What a treasure trove.” As soon as Ning entered, he saw the divine swords that had been firmly planted into the ground. They were clustered tightly next to each other, and they all emanated auras of terrifying sword-intent. Even the weakest sword was at least an Eternal weapon.

There was a stone stele next to every single sword, and each stone stele had a simple line of characters on them: “Thirty thousand cubes.” “Ninety thousand cubes.” “Fifty thousand cubes.” These were the prices of the swords, and the prices were actually quite low. Still, it hadn’t been easy for the Sword Palaces to collect these wondrous weapons, and there was no way Ning and the others could simply take the swords away without

paying anything at all.

“What is...”

Ning’s gaze suddenly turned towards the distance, where he sensed an incredibly terrifying sword-intent radiating from afar. Although it was quite a distance off, and although there were thousands of other swords there, Ning could sense that none of them were able to shake that terrifying sword-intent in the slightest. It was a broken sword that was emanating that aura, and it was placed atop a table.

This was the only sword in the entire Armaments Gorge which was placed on a table.

“A broken sword?” Puzzled, Ning walked towards it to give it a careful look.

“Eh? It was broken in such a clean, natural way. It seems as though it was actually forged this way and meant to be this way.” Ning quickly was able to tell that this sword wasn’t actually ‘broken’; it was created this way.

Rumble...

Sword-intent billowed out from the sword. Ning felt as though he was a tiny ship facing the wild waves of the ocean, about to be capsized at any moment. The incomparably ancient sword-intent... it was the most terrifying sword-intent Ning had ever sensed. The [Nameless] sword-art, Violetjewel, the Forest of Sword Pagodas... none of these things had ever given Ning such a sensation before.

It was vast, it was awe-inspiring, and it was unfathomably ancient. It made Ning feel like he was back on Earth, staring into the endless sea of stars.

“Eh?” When Ning reached within thirty meters of the broken sword, a surge of invisible force suddenly stopped him from moving any farther. No matter how Ning tried, he was unable to take so much as a single extra step.

“I actually can’t go any closer to it?” By now, Ning realized that there were no other swords within thirty meters of the broken sword. “And it

doesn't have a price tag on it?"

The other swords all had clearly labeled prices on the stone steles. Only this broken sword was different. There was nothing within thirty meters of it, not even a stone stele.

Ning gave it a long, deep look, firmly engraving it into his memory.

Roughly a third of the Armaments Gorge was set aside for swords. The rest was used to hold many other types of treasures and unique artifacts, and they too had prices listed next to them.

"Fifty thousand cubes." "Two million cubes." "Ten million cubes." "A hundred and ten thousand cubes."

The treasures and artifacts all had different prices.

Ning wanted to acquire Dao lightning. Things like Watersmoke Lightning, Firecloud Lightning, or Azurewood Lightning represented the Five Elements and thus were fairly cheap, requiring roughly two hundred thousand cubes. Other types of Dao lightning, however, were much more expensive. The 'Worldbury Lightning' cost 1.9 million cubes, and it was the most expensive of the nine types of Dao lightning which Ning needed.

Ning was able to acquire all nine types of Dao lightning here in the Armaments Gorge, but the price was quite steep.

The Armaments Gorge even had a tenth type of Dao lightning that was naturally formed. This lightning was known as the 'Allheaven Lightning' and cost ten million cubes, and it could only be used if one was willing to swear a lifeblood oath! The Allheaven Lightning could only be harvested by the almighty Hegemon himself, and it was unique to the Brightshore Kingdom.

If any of the other supreme organizations wished to acquire the Allheaven Lightning, they would have to pay an utterly shocking fee to the Brightshore Kingdom. Only for actual members of the Brightshore Kingdom would such a 'low' price of ten million cubes be accepted.

"Daolord Allgod himself was only able to acquire nine suitable types of Dao lightning, at which point he created his [Novessence Thunder]." Ning

couldn't help but sigh. "But the Brightshore Kingdom actually has ten types..."

Ning's horizons truly were broadened after he spent some time wandering through the Armaments Gorge. He finally began to realize how many treasures existed in the primordial chaos.

"Darknorth, done already?" Swordfive, one of the two golems guarding outside, asked Ning curiously, "What treasure have you chosen?"

"I was looking for but unable to find nine types of divine water, including Netherstring Water and Wormwind Water," Ning said. He was going to train in the [Novessence Water] secret art and needed nine types of water.

Fire could be classified into Elder fire (such as Golden Solarfire), Chaos fire, and Dao fire. The same was true for water. When Elder Gods or Ancestral Immortals were touched by Wormwind Water, they would find their bodies riddled with holes. Even their truesoul would begin to collapse.

"Oh, Chaos water?" The nearby Swordsix said in a low voice, "The Sword Palace doesn't have low-level water like that. One of the other palaces, the Palace of Kindwater, definitely has it. If you really need it, we can have the Kindwater Palace deliver it to you."

"I need nine types of Chaos water." Ning carefully listed out the number types of Chaos water he needed.

The [Novessence Water] was also divided into two parts. The upper part involved using nine types of Chaos water, while the lower part involved using nine types of Dao water.

This was a technique which was on par with the [Novessence Lightning]. However, because of certain innate properties of lightning, the [Novessence Thunder] was slightly more powerful. Once these two techniques were used in unison then they would become much more powerful, especially considering that water and lightning were mutually complimentary elements. It must be understood that when Daolord Allgod used all nine secret arts together, he had been able to suppress even

Eternal Emperors.

“Right. In the Armaments Gorge, I was only able to find a copy of the third Mirrorsnow Painting?” Ning looked at Swordfive and Swordsix.

“That’s the only one we have,” Swordfive said. “Emperor Mirrorsnow was a rather dissolute and wanton figure, but his sword-arts were exceedingly profound. Countless World-level cultivators were driven mad with lust for his paintings. If it wasn’t for the fact that only World-level cultivators are permitted to study from his legacies, they would probably be much more expensive.”

Ning agreed with this assessment. Emperor Mirrorsnow’s legacies actually provided even Daolords with good experience. If Daolords could learn from them, the price would become astonishingly high.

The only reason why the price was fairly low was because Emperor Mirrorsnow had decreed that only World-level cultivators could study his legacy. How much money could a World-level cultivator possibly have? Still, every single painting was usually worth around a hundred thousand cubes of chaos nectar.

“I need the fourth Mirrorsnow Painting,” Ning said.

“The fourth?” Swordfive and Swordsix exchanged a glance.

“It isn’t present within the Brightshore Kingdom. We’ll need to rely on the strength and reach of the Twelve Palaces in order to find it somewhere else in the primordial chaos,” Swordfive said. “If you want us to do that... before we begin, you’ll have to pay a certain amount of chaos nectar as a deposit. Also, if you search for one specific painting, it’ll probably end up costing you much more money.

“I can accept any price under half a million cubes,” Ning said.

“That’s fine, then.” Swordfive nodded. “Generally speaking, it costs us around two hundred thousand cubes when we purchase one from the outside world. It’ll just take us a bit of time. Three hundred thousand cubes is usually the maximum. Just wait for me to send word. Once the Twelve Palaces find the fourth Mirrorsnow Painting, I’ll immediately

inform you.”

“How long will it take, roughly?” Ning asked.

“Anywhere from ten years to a thousand years.” Swordfive was rather smug. “The Twelve Palaces are quite influential in the Endless Territories.”

Ning was speechless.

Many of the Daolords of the Twelve Palaces had been abducted from other places when they were at the World level. Ning himself was a good example of this. He had been a member of Vastheaven Palace, which was under the Dao Alliance. He was now here in the Brightshore Kingdom, but it was guaranteed that there was no way he would separate himself from the Dao Alliance. This was the reason why the Twelve Palaces had such influence throughout the Endless Territories.

“Within the gorge, I found a broken sword that I couldn’t even get close to,” Ning suddenly said.

“Couldn’t get close to?” Swordfive was startled for a moment, then nodded. “That means you two aren’t destined to be together.”

“Not destined?” Ning was puzzled.

“What, did you think that it was some sort of a formation preventing you from moving closer to it?” Swordfive asked.

“Wasn’t it?” Ning was even more puzzled now.

The nearby Swordsix said, “Of course not! The formations within the Armaments Gorge are only there to prevent you from taking away the treasures without paying the price. Generally speaking, you can get close to and touch the weapons. You were able to do so with the other weapons, right? But that broken sword is so innately powerful that it can actually prevent you from going too close to it.”

“Only one with the right karmic destiny will be permitted to move close to it. If it refuses to acknowledge you, there is nothing you can do.” Swordfive glanced at Ning. “Not even the two Palace Lords of our Sword Palace were acknowledged by it. After its previous master perished, it has

stayed by itself in the Armaments Gorge. It has been silent for a long, long time."

Ning blinked.

Alright, then. If even the Palace Lords, the Vice Palace Lords, and the countless generations of Daolords had failed to receive its approval, it only made sense that Ning himself was unable to receive its approval as well.

# Chapter 7: The Blazing Beast

Ji Ning knew very well that the Endless Territories was a place filled with countless marvelous treasures. It wasn't surprising for this particular treasure to have no affinity for him. It was already lucky enough for him to have gained the Nine Chaos Seals.

"Master." After leaving Armaments Gorge, Ning once more reunited with Su Youji.

"Let's find a place to live first." Ning and Su Youji flew through the skies. Suddenly, they saw a solitary mountain peak that jutted high up into the skies, surrounded by clouds and mist. This was one of the taller mountains in the Sword Palace. There were only so many 'formal' members of the Sword Palace, after all. Most people could easily find a place of their choosing within the Sword Palace, so long as there was no one else already there.

Ning waved a finger from afar. Whoosh! An estate suddenly appeared in midair, then descended upon the top of the mountain.

"From this day forth, this estate shall be our residence in the Sword Palace." Ning looked at Su Youji. "Right, Youji. The Twelve Palaces all have spacetime transfer arrays connecting them together. You can give the Palace of Fire a shot. Perhaps you'll be granted entry into it." He wasn't going to be able to give her much advice in the Dao of Fire. She'd have to rely on herself for everything.

"I have to say, now that I've wandered through the Sword Palace I do feel a bit jealous." Su Youji grinned. "Although I know my chances aren't that great, I'll still give it a shot."

"Mm." Ning nodded.

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The Sword Pagodas towered around everything around them. It was as though countless ancient powers were standing there in front of Ning. As Ning walked through the Forest of Sword Pagodas, his heart was filled

with amazement and regret. So many major powers who had been the dominant forces of their time, who had been able to defeat even Eternal Emperors, had all passed away. The number of Daolords in the Sword Palace who were able to live for more than a hundred thousand chaos cycles could be counted on two hands.

This was the unstoppable, ruinous power of time.

“If I am to become an Eternal Emperor, then I wish to become one who is akin to the almighty Hegemon. Otherwise... I would rather become one of those Daolords capable of slaying Emperors. I have to become powerful enough to convince the almighty Hegemon or someone on his level to rescue and revive my wife!”

A dreamy look was in Ning’s eyes. “If I could bring her back... me, her, and Brightmoon would be together once more. Our family of three would be together again. Even if I eventually fail my Daomerge and perish, it will all have been worth it.” Although Daolords walked a fine line between life and death with each step, even those who failed their Daomerge would be able to live extremely long lives. If their family of three was able to live together in peace for some time, Ning would be satisfied.

Ning’s greatest regret was... his wife Yu Wei had perished shortly after giving birth to Brightmoon.

Whoosh. Ning waved his hand, causing a thatched cottage to suddenly appear next to him. This thatched cottage was actually Ning’s temporal acceleration treasure. Ning had made a few cosmetic alterations to it.

Ning entered the thatched cottage, then sat down in the lotus position. He set the flow of time to a hundred times the normal rate, then turned his gaze towards the distant Sword Pagodas.

“So many supreme sword-arts for me to analyze... and in fact, every single sword-art is filled with the sword-intent of its creator.” Ning couldn’t help but sigh at this. For most cultivators, greed was not a good thing. In fact, if you learned too many techniques, you might end up losing yourself or your own way. However, Ning’s path was a path that began from understanding the fundamental essence of the sword, and it was a

path he would walk by analyzing and dissecting all other sword-arts, absorbing their best parts into his own [Brightmoon] sword-art.

The [Brightmoon] sword-art was still quite young and incomplete, but Ning had chosen a path where he would use it to embody all the mysteries of the Dao of the Sword.

This path Ning had chosen was a very difficult path. It had been a blurry, unclear path for Ning back when he was in the Three Realms, but the guidance Daolord Solesky had given Ning had made everything clear! He had analyzed thousands of sword-arts in the Allgod Estate, and now he had arrived in the most sacred part of the Sword Palace, the Forest of Sword Pagodas.

“There are 83612 Sword Pagodas here, many of which are comparable to my [Nameless] sword-art. I have to treasure this opportunity.” Having come from the Three Realms, Ning knew exactly how precious this opportunity was. It must be understood that the reason why none of the others had been able to reach the World level was because they had no access to good techniques. This was true for Ning’s own master, Suhbuti, as well as the martyrs such as Houyi or Three Purities. It was only in recent years that Ning’s Primaltwin had begun to transmit more information regarding the Dao back home.

However, this opportunity in the Sword Palace was truly priceless, and Ning valued it immensely. He was the second person to leave the Three Realms, with Mother Nuwa being the first. He didn’t know what had happened to Mother Nuwa, but he was determined to seize this opportunity to make himself as strong as he possibly could.

Su Youji stood outside the Forest of Sword Pagodas, staring at that distant form which was seated in that thatched cottage. The white-robed youth was completely absorbed with meditating on his sword-arts, and countless streams of swordforce began to naturally manifest in the area around him, followed by one sword-stance after another. These things manifested whenever Ning had a new insight.

“Master has never had a truly excellent teacher who was able to give

him any good guidance. Now, after so long, he has finally reached a truly holy place for cultivation. I imagine this will result in his power skyrocketing. He'll be even more dazzling than before," Su Youji murmured silently to herself.

"I have to work hard as well. Now that I have the legacy of Feixian the Exalted, I should be able to provide him with some assistance." All this time, it had been Ning helping Su Youji rather than vice versa. She felt grateful, but she also wanted to be able to do something for him.

"Time to go to the Palace of Fire." Su Youji turned her head and departed.

The Twelve Palaces were all linked together by spacetime transfer arrays.

"So many World-level cultivators here?" When Su Youji arrived at the Palace of Fire, she saw numerous World-level cultivators on the path before her seated in the lotus position. She walked forwards, quickly reaching the end of the path.

"Halt!" Suddenly, a black-armored Daolord barked out at Su Youji.

"I wish to join the Palace of Fire," Su Youji said.

"You'll have to wait. In about half a month, the next batch of World-level cultivators will be permitted to take part in the trials." The black-armored Daolord gave her a cold look. "You World-level cultivators are only permitted to remain on this path. You are not permitted to go into other parts of the palace without prior permission. If you do, the restrictive spells here will automatically activate and burn you to a crisp."

"Understood." Su Youji immediately nodded.

When she had entered the Sword Palace, she had been alongside Ji Ning and so the black-armored Daolord had been fairly courteous to her. Normally, however, the black-armored Daolords were quite cold and indifferent to these applicants. There were simply too many of them, after all.

"Another half month." Su Youji found an empty spot and sat down in

the lotus position.

“Another newcomer. There really are a lot of people who wish to join the Palace of Fire.” Just a few hundred meters away from Su Youji was a chubby youth dressed in fiery robes. The chubby youth mumbled to himself, “I’m a venerable grandmaster of alchemy, but I not only was rejected by the Palace of Spacetime, I even failed the trials of the Palace of Fire. Ugh. What should I do? Why the hell isn’t there a Palace of Alchemy?”

The chubby youth shook his head. “I’m skilled in alchemy, spacetime, and fire, but I wasn’t able to pass the trials of either the Palace of Spacetime or the Palace of Fire...” The chubby youth sighed. “It seems I’ll have to seek out brother Darknorth and ask him to help. He definitely entered one of the Twelve Palaces. If I follow him, things will be a bit easier for me.”

This chubby youth was World God Pillsaint.

He truly was an unlucky fellow. He himself was an extremely skilled, grandmaster-level alchemist and pillmaker. Why would a person like him be forced to engage in combat? In the past, he had to simply wave his hand and whatever he wished would be carried out, and his master would often give him advice with regards to alchemy. Who would’ve thought that he would suddenly be abducted to the Astral Islands. In the Astral Islands, combat was all that mattered. Who cared about you being an alchemist? He had started off with an Eternal weapon, but as soon as he arrived he had been robbed of it. Thankfully, alchemy required high levels of insight into both fire and spacetime, and he was quite skilled in both. This was why he had been able to survive for so long... but accumulating a complete legacy and being able to escape was incredibly difficult.

It was all thanks to Ji Ning’s assistance that he had been lucky enough to survive.

His skill in alchemy made his life in the Brightshore Kingdom an easy one, which was why he was able to reach the Twelve Palaces. Alas, his skills weren’t enough for him to enter the Twelve Palaces.

“I’ll keep trying. The trials for the Spacetime Palace were too difficult, but if I improve a bit in the Dao of Fire I might be able to make it into the Fire Palace.” World God Pillsaint gritted his teeth. He was determined to make something of this.. He knew that entering the Palace of Fire would be a tremendous boon, and he deeply desired to succeed.

Although Su Youji and Pillsaint were just a few hundred meters from each other, neither knew each other.

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The imperial palace of the Brightshore Kingdom.

Whoooooosh.

A blazing beast of fire was racing through the void of space. There were a few chaos stars in this vast region, which was part of the Brightshore Kingdom’s even vaster imperial palace. This was the place where the almighty Hegemon usually rested and resided.

The blazing beast was racing happily through it. Ever since it had been captured, it had been living a terrifying life of danger and adventure. Although a powerful member of his race known as ‘King Wu’ had been keeping eyes on it, it had still been worried that it might die at any moment. Thus, it had never dared to relax in the slightest. But now, it had finally survived and succeeded.

“Child.” An enormous behemoth appeared within the emptiness of space. When the behemoth stared at the blazing beast, its eyes were filled with warmth.

“Hegemon.” The blazing beast was so frightened that it immediately came to a halt and stood there obediently. It already knew that the almighty Hegemon was the most powerful member of their race.

“Ever since you were born, you have been training by yourself. You are still too young. Most of your time has been spent in slumber. Although you didn’t spend too much time in the abyss of the Astral Islands, you have still improved significantly. You are now qualified to enter the Archaeus region.” The giant behemoth’s head spoke out.

“The Archaeus region?” The blazing beast was puzzled. “Where, exactly?”

# Chapter 8: The Archaeus Region

As the almighty Hegemon used his true form to chat with the blazing beast, something else was happening at another part of the imperial palace, a place where there were thirteen royal thrones.

One of the thrones was as white as snow. The other twelve were golden in color.

A white-bearded, snowy-robed old man with six horns was seated atop the snowy-white throne. The other twelve golden thrones were occupied by twelve golden-armored figures, and Daolord Woodflower was one of them.

“I have summoned you all because there is something I wish to discuss with you.” The six-horned, white-bearded old man smiled. “As you all know, my race just gained a new member. This kid was born with exceptional innate gifts, and in a thousand short years he’s managed to escape the abyss below the Astral Islands. Even amongst my Imperials, he is a rare breed who stands at the very top.”

“Congratulations, Hegemon.”

“I am confident that this child shall soon reach the ‘King’ level of power in your clan.”

“The Brightshore Imperials have gained yet another expert.”

The twelve golden-armored figures belonged to the Twelve Palaces, and they all spoke some words of flattery. Still, these words were also words of truth. The dark abyss below the Astral Islands was reserved for tempering and training new members of the imperial race. Generally speaking, the new members of the race had been wandering the outside world alone and didn’t really have any good teachers. Most of them needed to spend a long period of time in the abyss before overcoming its trials. In addition, the Imperials were so few in number that every new addition to their race was a cause for celebration. A new Imperial who was exceptionally talented was even more precious.

The almighty Hegemon beamed merrily. Clearly, he was in an excellent mood. "This young fellow is so talented that I wish to send him into one of the alternate universes."

"Alternate universe?"

"An alternate universe?"

The faces of the twelve golden-armored figures turned pale.

"Hegemon, none of us have ever been to that place before." They all began to worry.

"Don't worry," the Hegemon said. "As you know, when I was meditating on the Dao of Spacetime, I once discovered traces of a completely different universe within the flows of spacetime and opened up a transversal conduit to it. Our two universes have different essences, which has an impact on my transversal conduit. Only those below the Daolord level of power are able to enter... but I was able to let my will slowly seep into that alternate universe and seduce some of its local lifeforms to come to our universe. Quite a few World-level cultivators from that universe have passed through my transversal conduit to come to our universe. I've gone through their memories and have learned quite a bit regarding that universe."

The Hegemon had discovered an alternate universe, had opened a transversal conduit to it, and then had been able to force his will through the conduit, even though he himself wasn't able to pass through it.

The almighty Hegemon's powers truly were quite terrifying!

"But... that's still an alternate universe." The twelve golden-armored powers were all quite wary.

The 'Endless Territories'...

It was a place that was so incredibly vast that it was still filled with many places which no one had ever explored. Many who broke through to become Eternal Emperors eventually left to wander the territories, only to never be heard from again. However, in the eyes of the greatest powers this infinitely vast region known as the 'Endless Territories' was actually

merely just a single ‘universe’.

Each universe had its own prime essences. An ‘alternate universe’ referred to a region which seemed similar but which had its own set of prime essences. For example, the prime essence of the Dao of the Sword in this universe would be different from that of the alternate universe. Thus, one could easily sense when one was in an alternate universe, as even the prime essences would be different.

“When I sent my will into that alternate universe, I was able to scan quite a few chaosworlds close to the exit of my conduit,” the almighty Hegemon said. “I’ve been watching this universe for many years, and now know quite a few things about it. There aren’t that many differences between our two universes. The main difference is that cultivators in the Endless Territories are spread out across many different organizations, but the alternate universe has a single unified power ruling over it.”

The Hegemon continued, “In the alternate universe, there is a place known as the Archaeus region. Countless cultivators in that universe deeply desire to enter the Archaeus region, and even many Daolords dream of having a chance to enter it. However, only a tiny number are able to enter it... but those who enter and then come out alive again are all strengthened dramatically.” The almighty Hegemon let out a sigh. “Although it might be a bit dangerous, cultivators who live in perfect safety will get soft. They won’t be able to make it far on their paths.”

“When you live on the edge between life and death, you’ll encounter many dangers but also encounter many miracles. The young fellow’s level of talent is so great that it is rare even amongst members of my race. I’ve prepared quite a few dangerous regions for him to test himself against, and the Archaeus region of the alternate universe is the first place and an extremely important place. If he can survive it, he’ll definitely have undergone utterly earthshaking transformations. In addition, once he is able to unify the mysteries of both our universe and the alternate universe, his future potential will be truly unlimited,” the almighty Hegemon said.

The twelve golden-armored experts grew increasingly interested as they listened to the Hegemon speak.

It was true that the path of cultivation had to be a path filled with danger. Only by experiencing more things and seeing more wonders would one be able to walk farther along one's path. For example, if Ji Ning had always trained by himself without going out adventuring, how strong could he possibly become? It was due to his adventures that he had first gone to the Allgod Estate, then to the Brightshore Kingdom. This was why he had grown so strong, so quickly.

This alternate universe... it was a place which most likely no one in all the Endless Territories had ever visited!

When the almighty Hegemon had created his transversal conduit, it had been limited by the differences in the laws between the two universes. As a result, only those below the Daolord level of power could use it.

"Hegemon, will members of the Twelve Palaces also be permitted to go?" Daolord Thousand Waves suddenly asked.

"Right, Hegemon. The Twelve Palaces have quite a few talented World-level cultivators as well." Daolord Puregood of the Palace of Fire was a man with a full red beard, and his face was red with excitement right now.

If the Hegemon was going to send one of his own clansmen into that alternate universe, it meant that he probably felt confident in his clansman's chances. It must be understood that the Hegemon was extremely protective of his clansmen. The entire reason he had founded the Brightshore Kingdom and developed the Twelve Palaces was so that there would be more protectors for his race! Given that the blazing beast was an incredibly talented member of his race... although the Daolords didn't know much about this 'Archaeus region', they felt certain that it would be a good place. They naturally had to try and win a chance for their people to enter it as well.

"I've invited you all to come here precisely because of this matter. Over the course of countless years, I've managed to seduce many World-level cultivators into entering our universe, and I managed to acquire a number of Archaeus medallions from them. You must have an Archaeus medallion in order to enter the Archaeus region... but of course, that'll

only be enough to gain entry. You will still have to face and overcome all the dangers inside the region itself,” the almighty Hegemon said. “I’m not completely confident in the young fellow’s chances, which is why I’ve come to ask you for your help. I would like for the Twelve Palaces to choose four other World-level cultivators to accompany him.”

“I have five Archaeus medallions. That means a total of five World-level cultivators,” the almighty Hegemon said. “Choose four from the Twelve Palaces. They shall work together with that young fellow of my race, and they’ll all stand a better chance as a result.”

“Agreed.”

“Absolutely.”

They all nodded.

The Brightshore Kingdom was one of the supreme organizations of the Endless Territories, after all. If they were only permitted to choose four World-level cultivators, they would most assuredly choose freaks that were strong enough to defeat ordinary Daolords of the First Step. If they went into the alternate universe, they most likely would stand a good chance of overcoming the Archaeus region.

“Just four, Hegemon? Can’t we bring a few more?” Daolord Thousand Waves immediately said.

“Hegemon, just four... it’ll be a bit hard to choose.”

“Just four for all twelve of our palaces? Our Palace of the Saber alone has more than eight Saberlords at the World level.” Everyone present began to feel a bit frustrated.

The almighty Hegemon simply said, “Bertulu and Eastcult are peerless geniuses, the likes of which even our Brightshore Kingdom only sees once in countless eons. In addition, both of them are most likely preparing to become Daolords soon. There’s no need for them to go.”

The twelve golden-armored figures all nodded in agreement.

Bertulu and Eastcult could be said to have reached the true apex of

power for World-level cultivators. There was no point to them tempering themselves at the World level any longer, especially Bertulu. Even prior to joining the Twelve Palaces, Bertulu had already reached the utmost peak of what even geniuses could reach. Eastcult, at least, had only reached that level after joining the Palace of the Saber and training in it for a period of time.

“The two of them are exempted. Aside from them, any member of the Twelve Palaces who have been acknowledged by their respective pagodas shall be considered,” the Hegemon said.

The Twelve Palaces each had a forest of pagodas. The one in the Sword Palace was known as the Forest of Sword Pagodas, whereas the one in the Fire Palace was known as the Forest of Fire Pagodas. The names were all fairly similar, and the concepts were the same; the World-level cultivators in the Twelve Palaces had to reach extremely high levels of mastery in a relevant Dao in order to be acknowledged by the pagodas.

The Sword Palace only had six Swordlords. As for the Saber Palace, it had eight Saberlords. However, since Eastcult was excluded, it only had seven.

“Aside from Bertulu and Eastcult, the Twelve Palaces have a total of sixty-six World-level cultivators who have been acknowledged by their respective pagodas,” Daolord Thousand Waves said. “How are we supposed to choose? Four out of sixty-six! I imagine all of them would badly desire to enter this Archaeus region.”

A chance to enter an alternate universe... it truly was a chance which, once missed, might never come again.

“No rush. That young fellow has just recently returned from the Astral Islands’ abyss. I need to teach him quite a few techniques first,” the almighty Hegemon said. “I’ll keep a close eye on him. When he is fully prepared, I’ll choose the four strongest cultivators.”

The almighty Hegemon waved his hand, causing a series of images to appear in the empty air around him. A total of sixty-six scenes appeared, with the sixty-six candidates having appeared within them. These were all candidates who had been acknowledged by their respective pagodas.

And of course... Ji Ning wasn't one of them.

# Chapter 9: The Full Mirrorsnow Set

“The Saber Palace won’t push for too much. Two slots is enough.”

“Yinwind, there’s only four slots total. Your Saber Palace wishes to take half of them?”

“We might even take three.”

The twelve golden-armored powers began to chat amongst themselves while they evaluated the sixty-six figures that had appeared in midair. They were actually quite familiar with most of the stronger World-level cultivators in every palace... and it was true that the Saber Palace held the most outstanding World-level cultivators of this generation! Prior to Bertulu’s arrival, Eastcult of the Saber Palace had been the indisputably most powerful World-level cultivator in the Twelve Palaces. As for the other Saberlords, they were all shockingly powerful as well.

When the Vice Palace Lord of the Saber Palace, Daolord Yinwind, spoke of possibly taking three slots... he wasn’t exaggerating!

There was a reason why this generation of World-level cultivators in the Saber Palace were all so strong. It was because the current Palace Lord of the Saber Palace... was Palace Lord Dawnstar! Lord Dawnstar was indisputably the most powerful expert amongst all the Daolords of the Twelve Palaces. In fact, even if you looked at all of the Daolords belonging to the various organizations of the Endless Territories, Lord Dawnstar would rank in the top three.

He was such a freakishly strong figure that he had needed just three strokes of his saber to slay an Eternal Emperor. He was also a Verge-level Daolord, and one could imagine how difficult the Dao he had chosen was. To successfully Daomerge would be incredibly difficult, and so he focused almost all of his efforts on it. However, for a period of time he had actually chosen to teach the World-level disciples of the Saber Palace in an extremely earnest, diligent manner.

Those World-level cultivators had all received the personal, attentive guidance of Lord Dawnstar! He had spent ten million years educating

them, then had left the Brightshore Kingdom and gone off to adventure through other places.

To teach others was also a form of training, in and of itself. To Lord Dawnstar, it was just one of many things he was doing to prepare for his Daomerge, but to those World-level cultivators it had been a stroke of tremendous karmic fortune. Lord Dawnstar was definitely one of the top three experts of the Dao of the Saber in all the Endless Territories, even if one factored in the various Eternal Emperors.

And thus...

This generation of World-level experts in the Palace of the Saber all became incredibly strong, and the geniuses among their ranks became even more dazzling.

.....

The Palace of the Sword.

“Palace Lord.” Three World-level cultivators bowed respectfully.

Lord Woodflower was seated in the lotus position as he looked back at the three of them. His true body was here in the Sword Palace; the one which had been in the imperial palace was merely an incarnation.

“A great opportunity has come before you,” Lord Woodflower said.

“Oh?” Swordlord Wildfire, Swordlord Yicheng, and Swordlord Graceless’s eyes all lit up.

“The other three Swordlords are returning from elsewhere in the Brightshore Kingdom. The six of you will need to make some immediately preparations,” Lord Woodflower said. “Bertulu and Eastcult aside, all of the World-level cultivators acknowledged by the pagodas shall have a chance to win this chance. However... in the end, only four will succeed.”

Swordlord Wildfire and the others were all surprised upon hearing this.

Those acknowledged by the pagodas were all capable of breaking through to become Daolords at any time... and they would all become extraordinary Daolords! If only four were to be chosen... what sort of

opportunity was this?!

“Make your preparations. I hope that at least one of the four will be from our Palace of the Sword.” Lord Woodflower sighed.

“Don’t worry, Palace Lord.”

“We will all work hard.”

The three Swordlords present were all filled with resolve and determination.

However, Lord Woodflower knew that determination alone wasn’t enough. Everyone acknowledged by the pagodas was filled with determination. In the end, strength was what would matter. Alas, this generation of World-level experts from the Palace of the Saber were simply too strong.

In the following days, those who had been acknowledged by the pagodas were all secretly summoned back from throughout the adventuring areas within the Brightshore Kingdom by the various leaders of the Twelve Palaces.

.....

The Palace of the Sword. The Daolord Cloudworld.

Whoosh.

A white-robed youth appeared out of nowhere within the skies of the Daolord Cloudword. He looked quite bedraggled, and his body was covered with bloody scars. However, he quickly became clean once more after a bit of light flashed over his body. Ji Ning hadn’t even heard the news about this exciting opportunity. As a result, he continued to live a relaxed and happy life.

Life really was quite relaxed and exciting. The reason why Ning had focused on the Dao of the Sword for so long was because he truly did love training with the sword. This was a love that came from the bottom of his heart, and the feeling of continuing to improve with the sword was absolutely intoxicating for him.

As for the Sword Palace, it was a holy land for sword practitioners.

“This is absolutely wonderful. I can spend a few hundred years meditating in the Forest of Sword Pagodas and gain many new ideas, then enter the Daolord Cloudworld and use them in actual battle to further verify and refine my sword-arts.” Ning flew through the skies in a very pleased manner. It had been twenty years since he had entered the Sword Palace, but his temporal acceleration treasure made it so that he had actually engaged in two thousand years of cultivation. He had already tried out the Daolord Cloudworld on numerous occasions by now.

“Youji still isn’t back?” Ning glanced sideways at his distant estate at the peak of the mountain. Su Youji still had yet to return. “It seems she has completely set her mind upon entering the Palace of Fire.”

Suddenly...

“Junior apprentice-brother Darknoth! Junior apprentice-brother Darknorth!” Shouts rang out from afar.

Ning turned his head, only to see a tall, muscular, heavily-bearded Daolord dressed in black armor fly towards him.

“Senior apprentice-brother, you are...?” Ning truly didn’t recognize this person. The Sword Palace had quite a few black-armored Daolords, and Ning had spent most of his time training and very little time in making friends. He truly didn’t know many people in the Sword Palace.

“My name is Jiwang,” the black-armored Daolord said. “Swordfive of Armaments Gorge asked me to send word for you to go meet him.”

“Swordfive?” Ning’s eyes lit up. Swordfive was a golem. Golems focused exclusively on their duty, which meant Swordfive wouldn’t summon him without a reason. Ning had long ago purchased the [Novessence Water], which meant the only thing still pending at the Armaments Gorge was his request for them to help him purchase the fourth Mirrorsnow Painting.

“Thank you, Daolord Jiwang,” Ning said, then immediately flew away from his estate.

Ning descended upon the Armaments Gorge, then immediately turned

to look at Swordfive and Swordsix. They each stood to one side of the entranceway.

“Darknorth.” Swordfive nodded at him.

“Is it the Mirrorsnow Painting?” Ning couldn’t help but blurt out.

“Aren’t you the impatient one.” Swordfive chuckled.

Ning grinned as well. “How can I not be? When I joined the Sword Palace, I didn’t choose a legacy.” Because Ning already had access to Emperor Mirrorsnow’s legacy, the other legacies in the Sword Palace really weren’t of interest to Ning. Although the Sword Palace did have legacies left behind by Eternal Emperors, they could only be chosen after Ning was acknowledged by the Sword Pagodas and passed the trials the Eternal Emperors had left behind. Ning clearly didn’t fulfill these requirements at present... and the other legacies were clearly inferior to Emperor Mirrorsnow’s.

“You were wise not to choose,” Swordfive said. “Your luck wasn’t bad. We didn’t need to spend too much effort in finding this fourth painting. However... the other party probably was able to guess that you care deeply about this painting, and so he gave a rather high price. You have to pay three hundred thousand cubes.”

Ning nodded. The Twelve Palaces had certain rules governing them. If you sent out word through the Twelve Palaces that you wished for the Daolords to help you find a certain item, there would be many Daolords who would help out. However, only the person who successfully located the treasure you wanted would be given a commission in thanks, as well as the Daolord who helped escort the treasure back to the palaces. The total commission given would be 10%. The other Daolords would have done all their work for nothing.

“Here are the three hundred and thirty thousand cubes.” Ning handed a gourd over to Swordfive, who accepted and inspected it.

Whoosh. Swordfive waved his hand, causing a painting which emanated sword-ki to fly out from deep within the Armaments Gorge. This painting depicted an image of an icy, snowy land.

“Take it.” Swordfive handed it over to Ning.

Ning couldn’t disguise his excitement as he accepted this painting of an icy snowland. Finally. He finally found it! Emperor Mirrorsnow had never accepted any true disciples, and so before he decided to go off adventuring he had produced these ten sets of paintings and spread them out into the universe. Those World-level cultivators who collected a full set of four and overcame his trials would become his personal disciples!

“A personal disciple of an Eternal Emperor? Since he dared make the claim that those who acquired a full set would become his personal disciple, I imagine I won’t be disappointed by the legacy he left behind.” Ning was filled with eagerness.

Some legacies merely involved individual techniques or abilities. Others had more thought put into them, such as World God Northrest who had worked hard to set up those ninety-eight stone steles to guide Ning.

As for the best ones... they included divine abilities, treasures, secret arts, and more. Daoist Threelives was a classic example. He had left behind everything for his successor.

“I wonder what Emperor Mirrorsnow left behind. Now that I have the full set, all I need to do is pass the fourth and final trial. I’ve already passed the first three trials; only the last one remains.” Ning immediately picked up the painting and put it away.

“Thank you.” Ning expressed his thanks to Swordfive and Swordsix, then transformed into a streak of light and disappeared.

Ning quickly returned to his own Immortal estate.

Swoosh! He flew into his estate, then shut the gates with a loud bang! No one would be able to bother him now. Even if Su Youji returned, she would have to stay outside and wait for him. Ning absolutely would not let anyone disturb him at all right now.

# Chapter 10: The Personal Disciple of an Eternal Emperor

The world within the fourth painting.

Whooooosh. A cold wind howled through as snow drifted through the skies. This was a world of ice and snow.

Ji Ning appeared out of nowhere. He swept the area with his gaze, then began to walk towards a distant thatched hut. A white-haired, grim-looking man was seated in the lotus position within the thatched hut. In front of him was a flagon of wine that was surrounded by flames. Also on the table, next to the wine, was an ordinary sword.

“Mm?” Ning looked at the white-haired man.

“What, has Daolord Flylead gained yet another disciple in his Snowsword Sect?” The white-haired man looked at Ning.

“Daolord Flylead? I don’t know him.” Ning shook his head.

“Oh?” The white-haired man glanced at Ning in surprise. “In this chaos cycle, Daolord Flylead has sent more than ten World-level cultivators to duel with me in swordplay. Although he himself isn’t that strong, he’s still a Daolord of the ThirdStep. Are you actually strong enough to seize the fourth painting from him by force?”

Ning instantly understood. This painting had been in the hands of a Daolord, and one who often sent different disciples into this place to duel in swordplay. It made sense. The first Mirrorsnow Painting had been in the hands of Daolord Windsource, after all.

“I’m not currently capable of seizing treasures from a Daolord of the Third Step. I bought it,” Ning said. “I have already defeated the emperor, the fisherman, and the assassin. Now, the only one left is you.”

“You’ve already defeated the other three?” Light flashed through the eyes of the previously calm-looking man, and a desire to do battle began to radiate from him. He stretched his hand out, picking up the sword from

the table as he rose to his feet. He slowly walked out of his thatched hut, his gaze focused on Ning. “You can address me as... swordsman!”

“Swordsman?” Ning was stunned. The man asked him to address him as ‘swordsman’. Ning had the sense that this person wasn’t going to be easy to deal with.

“I am the final trial for you.” The white-haired man stood there atop the snow, staring at Ning. “Draw your sword.”

“Alright.” With a flash, a Frostice sword appeared in Ning’s eyes.

The two were merely competing in swordplay, and so they would refrain from using divine abilities or special treasures.

Swish.

Ning was the first to strike. His sword-light flashed, causing his power to condense so tightly that it didn’t even have any impact at all on the snowflakes falling around it. It wasn’t necessarily true that a loud commotion and grand display of might meant that a person was strong. Dao lightning was a good example of this. When its power was unchained and flailed out randomly, its power was somewhat weakened. Only by focusing it tightly and using it against a single opponent would it unleash its maximum power.

The same was true for sword-arts!

Clang! The white-haired man struck out as well.

The swords of both moved vastly faster than the limits of the Heavenly Daos, vastly faster than the speed of light. If ordinary mortals were watching... in fact, if Celestial Immortals or Empyrean Gods were watching... they would only see two blurs flickering. They wouldn’t even see any sword-light, because the swords were moving faster than they could see.

The two constantly flashed and flickered through the falling snow, their sword-light clashing repeatedly.

“What a powerful and pure sword-art.” Ning was secretly shocked. This

white-haired man's sword-arts definitely were strong enough for him to be addressed as 'swordsman', and he lived up to his reputation as the final trial. If the emperor, the fisherman, and the assassin all belonged to different schools of swordplay, then this swordsman's sword-arts encompassed all schools.

His sword-arts could be explosive, could be ephemeral, but could also be cold and sharp...

Technically, his sword-arts were 'merely' on the same level of unpredictability as the assassin's and the same level of ephemeralness as the fisherman's. However, because he had reached such a high level in every aspect, his sword-arts became incredibly terrifying to deal with. When a person reached a level where he had no flaws at all, his attacks could easily transform into defensive movements, which could easily translate into deceptive openings, which could easily transform into such assassination strikes. All the changes and transformations were very fluid and natural.

It was like an endless cycle that had inexhaustible moves. Ning had reached a very high level of sword-arts. His sword-arts were significantly better than that of the emperor, the fisherman, and the assassin, making it easy for him to defeat them, but for a time he was completely unable to do anything to this 'swordsman'.

Slash!

Clang!

Sword-light continued to clash repeatedly.

Ning was filled with a strong desire to win, causing him to constantly try new tactics for gaining victory. Slowly, the insights he had gained in the Forest of Sword Pagodas began to merge into his Unicorn's Domain. In truth, Ning had been steadily improving in the Unicorn's Domain during his years in the Sword Palace, as it represented a path in sword cultivation to begin with.

This was a path that could be continuously perfected. It would even allow him to become a Daolord of the First Step, a Daolord of the Second

Step, or even a Daolord of the Third Step...

However, this path wasn't the most difficult path. It was merely a path on par with the fisherman's path, and it represented the sixth stance of the [Nameless] sword-art. The seventh stance of the [Nameless] sword-art represented a path that was even more difficult to take.

Without Ning even realizing it, the two ended up battling for more than six hours. As the fight progressed, Ning's advantage became increasingly apparent.

It made sense. He had already been able to defeat the first three trials while he had been in the Astral Islands. Although he hadn't spent too much time in the Sword Palace, two thousand years of accelerated time had resulted in him improving significantly.

Clang!

An ephemeral streak of sword-light brushed past the white-haired man's sword, then stabbed him in the throat.

Ning then withdrew his sword and stepped back.

"You won." The white-haired man smiled.

Ning, however, had a rather distant look in his gaze. Victory in this battle had taught Ning what choosing a path truly meant.

The Unicorn's Domain was a comparatively easier path. The white-haired man's path was a path that perfectly fused together multiple different paths of the sword. This was a path that was more than ten times harder to traverse, but it was also more powerful.

But of course...

A Daolord of the Fourth Step could easily defeat the white-haired man's sword-arts using the Unicorn's Domain. Ji Ning had similarly reached an incredibly high level of expertise in the Unicorn's Domain, and he could sense that he was just a hair away from becoming a Daolord. If he made some more breakthroughs, he would probably be able to reach the Daolord level whenever he wished... but that would mean that he would

have become a Daolord through the Unicorn's Domain.

"However... in the end, the Unicorn's Domain is not my path. Nor is the white-haired man's sword-art my path."

Ning's path was a path that would lead him to the very essence of the sword itself. He would infuse all of the essence of the sword and countless sword-arts into his own [Brightmoon] sword-art, which represented his truest path.

The white-haired man had merely fused a few different sword-arts in a perfect manner. It was more profound than the Unicorn's Domain, but it couldn't really be said to point to the true essence of the sword itself. The latter path was the purest and most difficult path to take... but this was what Ning wished to obtain from his sword cultivation. He had to take this path. Only by taking the path you wished to take would you be on the most suitable path.

Rumble...

Ning was seated in the lotus position within his Immortal estate. It had merely been a divine power clone which he had sent into the fourth world.

After defeating the overseer of the fourth painting, Ning called out with his will and summoned all four Mirrorsnow Paintings. The four paintings hung there in the air, slowly drawing closer to each other before they completely merged into one. After the four paintings completely merged together, they actually transformed into a single painting. This painting looked quite ordinary, and it didn't have any sword-intent within it. It did, however, depict a man.

This man carried a sword on his back and was staring off into the distance. He looked extremely handsome and suave.

"Disciple, this is the painting of myself, your master. Kowtow three times first." A voice rang out from within the painting.

Ning was badly startled by this. In the next moment, he felt completely speechless.

Jeeze, Emperor Mirrorsnow... why are you such a narcissist? After the

four paintings merged together, they actually formed a self-portrait of yourself? And you actually drew yourself in such a perfect, flawless manner?

The other paintings were all quite terrible, but his portrait was quite well-done. The strange thing was, there was almost no sword-intent radiating from this image. Ning strongly suspected that this probably wasn't actually drawn by Emperor Mirrorsnow himself.

There was no way the man could paint such a nice portrait.

"I wonder what this master of mine has left behind. I had best kowtow first." Ning immediately knelt down, kowtowing three times to the levitating painting of Emperor Mirrorsnow.

Whoosh.

As soon as he finished kowtowing, the painting emanated a blinding light that completely surrounded Ning. Ning didn't resist, and with a swoosh he was drawn directly inside of it.

Within the Eternal Emperor's painting.

This was an incredibly vast and ancient world. A man carrying a sword on his back was standing there atop the desolate earth, and there were four retainers who were standing by his side in a respectful manner. These four retainers were the emperor, the assassin, the fisherman, and the swordsman.

Whoosh.

Ning appeared out of nowhere next to them.

"Disciple." The man carrying the longsword on his back looked at Ning.

Ning immediately understood that this person was most likely Emperor Mirrorsnow. Still... it most likely wasn't the Eternal Emperor's true form. Actually, the Eternal Emperor really did look quite handsome. The painting apparently had been an accurate one, and the sword-intent which naturally radiated from his eyes caused Ning to feel a sense of alarm in his heart. Although this sword-intent seemed quite calm, it had a hidden

sharpness that was far more terrifying than the sensation which Daolord Woodflower had emanated.

“Master,” Ning called out respectfully.

“This is a world which will only appear after all four paintings merge together.” The Eternal Emperor looked at Ning. “I’ve left a strand of my will in this place, all for the sake of waiting for you, my dear apprentice.”

# Chapter 11: A Memory Fragment

The Eternal Emperor looked at Ji Ning, extremely moved. “I delight in exploring, in visiting one beautiful new world after another. I truly don’t have the patience necessary to teach a disciple. However... if I keep adventuring like this, I’ll probably die one day. If I die, I die, but I’m afraid that after enough years pass, even my name shall be forgotten by the vast majority of cultivators.”

“It will be you, my dear disciples, who shall ensure that my name and reputation shall exist unto perpetuity. Once you become my personal disciple, you must accept ten more disciples on my behalf before you attempt your Daomerge. They can be considered honorary disciples of mine,” the Eternal Emperor said. “The skills I impart unto you, you can only impart unto those ten honorary disciples.”

“Your disciple understands.” Ning nodded.

Accept ten disciples before his Daomerge? This was a fairly easy oath.

“Then swear the oath,” the Eternal Emperor said.

Ning immediately swore a lifeblood oath. If he wanted to transmit certain legacies to his future disciples or to Subhuti and the others in the Three Realms, he could simply transmit his own insights. He would have a Dao that was completely his own, after all! The Eternal Emperor’s legacy primarily served as a guidepost for him, a way to show him how he should walk his future path and avoid certain wrong choices.

If a person walked forward blindly without any guideposts, it would be easy to get lost and make the wrong decisions. Every step taken by a Samsara Daolord was a step which straddled the line between life and death. There were no ways to take back a misstep! Once you made that misstep, you would die and your Dao would dissipate.

“Mm.” The Eternal Emperor watched Ning swear the oath, nodding in satisfaction. He transformed into a streak of light that flew straight into Ning’s body. Ning wasn’t able to resist him in the slightest.

Rumble...

Ning just stood there in the middle of the wilderness, surrounded by the four retainers of the Emperor. The swordsman, the fisherman, the assassin, and the emperor all stared at him as ripples of power began to emanate from the area around him. Clearly, the many memories and abilities which the Eternal Emperor's strand of will contained were merging into Ning's own memories. That strand of divine will held simply too much power and memories, making it physically painful for even someone as mighty as Ning to absorb.

Within Ning's sea of consciousness. A large amount of information was flooding into this place.

"Before I succeeded in my Daomerge, I obtained an Eternal sword-art known as the [Heartseal] sword-art. This sword-art has a total of fifteen stances. This is the first stance, the Flysword stance..." A memory fragment entered Ning's mind. The speaker was Emperor Mirrorsnow, and in the memory he wielded a single sword and began to display the first stance of the [Heartseal] sword-art."

Emperor Mirrorsnow's will was in complete control of these many memory fragments. He made it so that Ning was able to personally watch his memories.

"This is second stance, the Mountainsword stance." Emperor Mirrorsnow put this stance on display as well. This was a far more effective method than simply meditating on sword-intent, as the Eternal Emperor was putting on a personal display. Not only was his sword-intent clear and obvious, he executed every movement in perfect detail and clarity. For the sake of being able to teach better, the Emperor Mirrorsnow displayed every single stance three times. The first time, he went through every single movement extremely slowly. The second time, he would display it without using any divine power or Immortal energy. The third time, he would use it with true, full power."

"This is the fifteenth stance, the Heartseal stance. Once the Heartseal forms, eternity shall be gained."

This final memory fragment was of Emperor Mirrorsnow executing sword-arts in a vast region of primordial chaos. When his sword struck out, an utterly titanic seal suddenly manifested which completely extinguished everything in the primordial chaos in the area. One chaos star after another was wiped out by the force of this strike. Ning was able to count over a hundred million chaos stars that were shattered and splintered by the force of this strike.

Ning was truly speechless when he saw this. When Emperor Mirrorsnow had unleashed a full-strength attack with this stance, just how wide an area had it covered? His sword was so fast that it had surpassed the concept of speed itself. In fact, it had surpassed even the very concept of spacetime itself. Otherwise, how could it have wiped out that many chaos stars? Even if his sword moved thousands of times faster than the speed of light, how could it possibly fly out that far, that fast?

And yet, it was an undisputable fact that Emperor Mirrorsnow's sword had wiped out everything in an infinitely vast region, leaving nothing behind.

Fortunately, the region which Emperor Mirrorsnow had chosen to display this stance was a region that was completely devoid of life. Otherwise, the number of casualties that would've been caused would be incalculable.

"I've completely displayed the [Heartseal] sword-art for you. This was the sword-art I trained in as I progressed, step by step, to gain eternity for myself. It is extremely difficult to train in this sword-art, but it can be separated into four different sets of sword-arts."

Emperor Mirrorsnow began to display a new set of sword-arts, and Ning instantly understood.

These four separate sword-arts could be described as the fisherman's sword, the assassin's sword, the emperor's sword, and the killer's sword. The fisherman, the assassin, and the emperor each used one of these three sets of sword-arts, while the final challenger, the swordsman, used a sword-art that could be considered the most basic, elementary version of

the [Heartseal] sword-art.

“These four sets of sword-arts each represent a separate path. Although they seem quite ordinary, it won’t be hard for you to become a Daolord of the Fourth Step through using one of these sword-arts. However, even if you do reach that level, your accomplishments will be mediocre,” Emperor Mirrorsnow said.

“Now, these four sword-arts can actually be separated into ninety-six sword-arts.” Emperor Mirrorsnow once again began to carefully display and describe every single sword-art.

The reason why this transmission had been such a painful and arduous one to accept was primarily because each and every memory fragment contained scenes of the Eternal Emperor personally displaying his sword-arts. A large amount of stances were included, as were various types of sword-intent.

“The [Heartseal] sword-art can be separated into four fairly average sword-arts, which can then be separated into ninety-six low-class sword-arts. If you have sufficiently high insights into the sword, it will be easy for you to learn them.

“I have finished transmitting my sword-arts to you. Now, I shall transmit a divine ability to you, an extremely powerful divine ability that will allow your attacks to explode with power. You will be able to instantly unleash a extreme level of power with it. This divine ability is known as the [Five Seals Sword Dao]...” The transmission of a divine ability was much simpler. It mainly included basic information in how to train in that divine ability, and Ning was able to instantly memorize it all.

“Oh, right. I left behind four golem servants. They shall follow you, my personal disciple, and protect you. That way, I can guarantee you won’t die too quickly.

“Mm. I’ve taught you everything I should teach, and I’ve said everything that needs to be said. Train hard and make sure you don’t besmirch my mighty name, dear disciple. If fate wills it, perhaps we shall truly meet in the flesh one day.”

The transmission came to an end.

Back within the desolate wilderness.

The four retainers continued to watch Ning. While Ning had been accepting the transmission, he had been rippling with waves of power. This state had persisted for two full days before he came to a halt and took a rest. The main reason it had taken this long was because it truly was difficult for Ning to completely absorb all of the information in the memory fragments.

In truth...

If Ning had personally watched Emperor Mirrorsnow display his sword-arts, he wouldn't have been able to understand or memorize the truly profound parts. However, Emperor Mirrorsnow had completely transmitted his memories directly into Ning's mind. Once the process was complete, Ning would never forget those memories unless he personally wiped them away.

"Eh? Why hasn't Darknorth woken up yet?"

"Right. There are no more ripples; the transmission should've concluded."

"He's probably training."

The four retainers chatted amongst themselves.

Their guesses were correct. Ning was indeed training. In the Forest of Sword Pagodas, he had only been able to visualize and sense the sword-intents radiating from the pagodas. There was obviously no way he could see or visualize those ancient powers actually displaying their various sword-arts, much less have their memories be directly infused into his mind! The [Heartseal] sword-art was also an incredibly profound sword-art, and one which could be broken down into multiple different sword-arts. This made it extremely easy for Ning to train in.

Many of the questions he had regarding the Dao of the Sword were wiped clean. He was continuously gaining a deeper and deeper understanding as his sword-arts dramatically improved.

This explosively effective training session persisted for more than half a month before it finally came to an end.

“Whew.” Ning opened his eyes.

“Having a master versus not having one... it really is completely different.” Ning glanced at the world around him in a jubilant mood. He knew that he had just completely changed compared to a month ago.

Ning now knew how he should advance from the World level all the way to the Eternal Emperor level. In the past, he knew nothing. Now, he knew.

“I wonder who is stronger? My master Emperor Mirrorsnow, Violetjewel creator Emperor Violetmount, or the creator of the [Nameless] sword-art,” Ning mused. “Still... the Violetjewels are merely middle-grade Eternal weapons. Once I become a Daolord of the First Step, I’ll probably need to switch them out for something else. As for the [Nameless] sword-art, I only have the first seven stances to them.”

Ning understood that in the future, he would spend much of his time meditating on the [Heartseal] sword-art and learning from it, infusing its mysteries into his own Dao of the Sword.

“If I could gain the complete [Nameless] sword-art legacy and the complete legacy of Emperor Violetmount, then I would now have three complete legacies. I could simultaneously absorb the teachings and mysteries of all three legacies, then go learn from the Forest of Sword Pagodas. I’ll definitely improve even more quickly then.” When this thought flickered through Ning’s mind, he couldn’t help but grin.

“Darknorth, was that helpful to you?”

“It seems you’ve gained quite a bit from it.”

“Given how strong Darknorth is already, he’ll soon be able to break through to become a Daolord whenever he wishes.” The four retainers all spoke out when Ning woke up.

Ning smiled and nodded. “I indeed can break through to become a Daolord. However, that path is not my path.”

The Unicorn's Domain had indeed been dramatically improved.

The Unicorn's Domain was a path akin to the fisherman's path.

Emperor Mirrorsnow's [Heartseal] sword-art could be divided into four sword-arts, one of which was the [Fisherman's Sword]. Ning's highest level of attainment in recent years was in the Unicorn's Domain, which was his Unicorn's Domain had dramatically improved just half a month after Ning had received the legacy. Ning could already sense that his accomplishments in the Unicorn's Domain were enough for him to use it as his core foundation to rebuild his divine body and become a Daolord of the First Step.

Samsara Daolords. Each step they took resulted in their divine bodies being completely reconstituted! If you took a single wrong step, you would cause your body to crumble. You would die and your Dao would vanish.

"Just as Emperor Mirrorsnow said, although all four sword-arts which make up the [Heartseal] sword-art can allow a person to become a Daolord of the Fourth Step, they will result in mediocrity." Ning secretly shook his head. Just becoming a Daolord was not enough.

# Chapter 12: The Twelve Scrolls of the Sutra of Eternity

“The four of you.” Ji Ning looked at the four surrounding him. “According to what my master told me, you four shall follow me in the future, right?”

“Right.” The four all nodded.

“Might I ask how strong the four of you are?” Ning asked.

“The four of us are roughly comparable to peak-level Daolords of the Third Step. But of course, the swordsman’s sword-arts are a bit better, making him slightly more powerful,” the golden-robed emperor said.

Ning couldn’t help but feel stunned. All four golems were comparable to peak Daolords of the Third Step?

This was the legacy which his master had left behind for him? The more masters like this, the better!

“Golems comparable to Verge-level Daolords are too expensive. The Eternal Emperor did have one such golem, but he ended up selling it to procure forty golems comparable to peak Daolords of the Third Step for his personal disciples like you,” the golden-robed emperor said.

Ning was speechless.

Alright, fine. Maybe he had gone a bit too far in mentally praising his master. Still, Ning did know that golems with the strength of Verge-level Daolords were indeed quite expensive, and forging them was no easy task. After all, true Verge-level Daolords not only had considerable Immortal energy and divine power, they also had mighty magic treasures and high insights into the Dao. To have a mere golem be a match for one of them was extremely difficult. Daolord Allgod was an incredibly skilled artificer, but even he had been only able to painstakingly forge a single Verge-level golem.

The Sword Palace had collected many golems over the course of

countless years, but even it had only acquire a total of nine Verge-level golems. Those golems were the ones titled Swordone through Swordnine.

Although the Daolord Cloudworld had many golems within it, those were all fairly weak. The strongest were probably just on par with the four standing right in front of Ning.

“If you are to follow me, should I bind you all?” Ning asked. He was too weak right now; there was no way for him to forcibly bind them.

“Unacceptable.”

“Per the Eternal Emperor’s instructions, we can each only help you out a single time prior to you defeating us in battle. Once you are able to defeat us, we’ll permit you to bind us and be your eternal servants.” The emperor, the swordsman, the fisherman, and the assassin all refused in solemn fashion.

Ning was instantly speechless.

Fine.

Most likely, Emperor Mirrorsnow was afraid that he would rely on the golems too much and so had restricted him to using them a single time. He probably just wanted to ensure that his disciples wouldn’t be killed while they were weak if they were unlucky enough to be trapped in a dangerous situation.

“Just one time each. Still, that’ll keep me alive in dangerous situations.” Ning was in quite a good mood.

“The divine ability my master taught me makes it so that someone with the body of a half-step Daolord is able to match a full Daolord of the First Step. Unfortunately, my azureflower mist energy ensures that I already am comparable to a Daolord of the First Step, and it lasts for a very long period of time.” Ning shook his head. This divine ability really was somewhat useless to him.

If he used it, his divine power would probably run dry after a short battle. How could it possibly last as long as the azureflower mist energy in battle?

“The most valuable part of the legacy were those memory fragments which Master transmitted to me.” Ning couldn’t help but feel excited. Although there had been legacies in the Astral Islands, those legacies consisted of simple information which any cultivator could learn and make use of. Those legacies within the Astral Islands would be transmitted to countless cultivators over the course of aeons, and they weren’t truly valuable.

These memory fragments of Emperor Mirrorsnow could only be transmitted a single time, and their creation had involved the Eternal Emperor infusing his own divine will into them.

.....

The Brightshore Kingdom. The imperial palace.

Rumble...

The blazing beast stood there in a region of empty stace, staring at the distant, towering behemoth. Golden light began to radiate from the behemoth’s giant eyes, and the light completely swallowed the blazing beast.

Within that barrier of golden light, many mysteries and secrets were being transmitted to the blazing beast in an endless stream.

“GRWAAAR!” The blazing beast’s body trembled from the pain. Every so often, flames would flicker and burst out in the area around him.

Finally, the golden light dissipated.

“Hegemon.” The blazing beast revealed a look of delight as he stared at the distant, towering behemoth.

“After twelve separate transmissions, you have completely memorized the twelve scrolls of the [Sutra of Eternity]. Our race has very few members, and those who are suitable for my legacies are even fewer. Long, long ago, our race was forcibly enslaved by the Ancient cultivators. The Ancients are on par with us in terms of innate gifts, but they have many legacies. I was once fortunate enough to acquire a legacy left behind by a senior of our race, a set of ten scrolls called the [Ten Scrolls of Eternity]. It

was thanks to that legacy that I was able to train to my present level, and I perfected them and supplemented them, transforming them into the [Twelve Scrolls of Eternity].

“In this era, our race is on an equal footing with the Ancients, precisely because of the [Twelve Scrolls of Eternity]. These twelve scrolls include all things with them. No matter what path you choose, it will be of assistance to you, which is why I will transmit this legacy to every single member of our race.

“Child... as of right now, I am the only member of our race who has broken through to become an Eternal Emperor. I hope you will be the second one of our race,” the towering behemoth concluded.

“Yes, Hegemon.” The blazing beast was incomparably excited. In recent years, he had come to learn much of the history of his race from the time he had spent in the imperial palace. He naturally now felt a tremendous sense of kinship and belonging! As for these [Twelve Scrolls of Eternity], they included virtually all Daos. This caused him to feel even more awe towards the almighty Hegemon.

“Choose an imperial name for yourself,” the towering behemoth instructed.

“When I was born and gained consciousness, I gave myself a name, ‘God of Sky and Fire’. Let my name be Skyfire of the Brightshore Imperials,” the blazing beast said.

A look of amusement appeared in the towering behemoth’s eyes. ‘God of Sky and Fire’?

The members of his race were only born from the primordial chaos under certain, very unique situations. They were incredibly few in number, and if it wasn’t for the fact that the Hegemon went out of his way to hunt for them, many would probably wander the primordial chaos for countless years by themselves. Generally speaking, they would choose rather odd names for themselves. ‘God of Sky and Fire’ was a fairly amusing one.

“Spend some time training in the [Twelve Scrolls of Eternity]. I will give you a thousand years. A thousand years later, I’ll send you into an

alternate universe, which will be your first training grounds,” the towering behemoth said.

“Yes, Hegemon.” The blazing beast was very excited, and he knew he needed time to study the [Twelve Scrolls of Eternity]. Actually, after he learnt this precious technique he would continue to rise in power even as he roamed the outside world.

This was how the Brightshore Kingdom worked. After the most powerful World-level cultivators were selected and recruited, they would receive endless legacies and secret arts from the Twelve Palaces. The same was true for the imperial clan. New entrants to the imperial clan would also be forced to undergo certain tempering experiences, after which they would be transmitted the [Twelve Scrolls of Eternity].

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The imperial palace. There were thirteen royal thrones here hanging high in the skies.

The white-haired, six-horned old man dressed in snowy robes spoke out. “A thousand years from now, I will select the four most powerful World-level cultivators and have them accompany Skyfire Brightshore to the alternate universe. It will be up to them to make the most out of it.”

“A thousand years?”

“So we have another thousand years.”

Now that the twelve golden-armored powers knew exactly how long they had, they began to be filled with anticipation.

Time flowed on. More and more of the cultivators who had been acknowledged by the pagodas and who had been out adventuring within the Brightshore Kingdom began to return, responding to the summons of the Twelve Palaces.

“Senior apprentice-brother Wildfire, I heard from Lord Woodflower that a great opportunity awaits us?”

“Yes. Everyone acknowledged by the pagodas will have a chance at it.

However, only the four most powerful members of the Twelve Palaces will be granted it.”

“Just four?”

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The Palace of the Sword.

Two youngsters were striding within it. One was the red-haired Wildfire, whereas the other was an icy-faced child who was wielding a shortspear.

“We don’t have much time left, just nine hundred years,” Wildfire warned.

“I plan to spend the next nine hundred years in the Forest of Sword Pagodas,” the icy child said.

“I’m planning to do the same. I’m going to spend my time in meditation.” Wildfire agreed with this idea. The Forest of Sword Pagodas was the most sacred place within the entire Sword Palace. It had many sword-arts which had been personally left behind by the mighty Daolords from a previous era. If you chose to learn from sword-arts that were similar to your own, you would benefit greatly from it.

The icy child swept the area with his gaze. He saw a distant thatched cottage, and within that cottage sat the white-robed Ji NIng.

“Who is that?” The icy child asked curiously.

“His name is Darknorth. He’s a newly arrived junior apprentice-brother,” Wildfire said.

“Why is he using a temporal acceleration treasure? Has he been acknowledged by the Sword Pagodas as well? Is he also trying to seize every moment to train?” The icy child asked.

“No.” Wildfire shook his head. “He’s new, and as soon as he came here he began to use a temporal acceleration treasure. He’s probably trying to finish something as fast as he can.”

The icy child nodded.

Normally, cultivators wouldn't go out of their way to use temporal acceleration treasures, as they didn't make much of a difference. The more one trained, the more those moments of epiphany mattered. Only when there was a pressing need would people use temporal acceleration treasures.

"Our opponents shall be all the World-level cultivators who were acknowledged by their respective pagodas. Senior apprentice-brother Wildfire, you'll be one of my opponents as well." The icy child looked at Wildfire.

"I won't take it easy on you." Wildfire chuckled as well.

The two didn't care about Ji Ning at all. Right now, all of the talented geniuses of the Twelve Palaces who had been acknowledged by their pagodas were trying to seize every moment to strengthen themselves as much as they could.

Ning, however, knew of none of this. He was still completely absorbed in his cultivation.

He had the memories of his master, Emperor Mirrorsnow, providing him with careful and detailed guidance. He also had the opportunity to analyze the Eternal Emperor's sword-arts and compare them to the many sword-arts of the Forest of Sword Pagodas. His level of insight was continuously rising at a pace that was unspeakably faster than before he had acquired the Eternal Emperor's legacy. Ning enjoyed this process very much, and was completely intoxicated by it.

And so, in the blink of an eye, more than eight hundred years passed with Ning consumed by his quiet meditations.

# Chapter 13: The Seventh Stance of [Nameless]

The Forest of Sword Pagodas was filled with tens of thousands of towering Sword Pagodas which stood silently erect. Numerous cultivators were scattered throughout the Forest of Sword Pagodas, quietly training with no one disturbing them.

There was a thatched cottage in the forest as well, and within the thatched cottage was a white-robed youth. Streams of sword-ki surged in the area around him, occasionally flicking out as sword-stances.

Suddenly, the youth opened his eyes. A look of delight could be seen in his gaze.

“I’ve finished mastering the seventh stance of the [Heartseal] sword-art, the ‘Reincarnation’ stance.” Ning was in a superb mood. “My master, Emperor Mirrorsnow, used the Reincarnation stance to break through to become a Samsara Daolord, and now I myself have learned this stance as well.

Whooooosh.

Sword-light began to flood the area around Ning. Some of the sword-light was filled with an aura of murder, some of it was fluctuating and unpredictable, while the rest was dominating and savage. The different types of sword-arts cycled through in a perfect manner, and no flaws could be seen at all from any of the attacks. It truly was like the perfect cycle of reincarnation itself, and when any enemies made even the slightest of mistakes the Reincarnation stance would ensure that they would be trapped and buried.

“Emperor Mirrorsnow was a dissolute, adventurous man, but his sword-arts were extremely cautious and tight.” Ning sighed in amazement.

“Mm. Given my current level of insight into sword-arts, I should be able to train in the seventh stance of the [Nameless] sword-art.” Ning immediately began to ponder the [Nameless] sword-art.

Thanks to the Eternal Emperor's legacy, Ning was able to learn the [Heartseal] sword-art incredibly fast! By comparison, training in the [Nameless] sword-art was considerably more taxing... and Ning had the feeling that the seventh stance of the [Nameless] sword-art was actually more difficult than the seventh stance of the [Heartseal] sword-art.

The spacetime acceleration cottage maintained a rate of a hundred times the normal flow of time. Ning's mastery of his sword-arts had already skyrocketed, making the seventh stance of the [Nameless] sword-art much easier to understand as he continuously meditated upon it.

The seventh stance of the [Nameless] sword-art was named 'Cosmic Heart'. It was far more complicated than the Unicorn's Domain, and it was even more profound than the Reincarnation stance.

More than thirty years went by.

"Eh?" Ning opened his eyes. A distant look was in his gaze, as though everyone around him including the thatched cottage no longer existed. It was as though he was surrounded by an absolutely pristine, illusory world... and a single tear had appeared within it.

This single tear seemed to be a tear of love... but it also appeared to be the very heart of this world.

Slash!

Ning flicked out with his fingernail as if he was stabbing forward with a sword, piercing that tear with it.

In this moment, Ning's heartforce burst out and completely meshed together with his finger.

Whoosh!

A shocking aura of sword-intent billowed out of the thatched cottage and into the surrounding area.

Ning was completely stunned and absorbed by the perfect beauty of this strike. He couldn't help but close his eyes and savor the marvelousness of that sword-art. He had naturally, unconsciously infused his sword-arts

with his heartforce, but he didn't force it as other cultivators did. Rather, it had all happened in a very natural manner. He hadn't even intentionally tried to add heartforce into the mix. He had purely wished to execute this sword-art to its full potential. His subconscious mind merged his heartforce into it, causing him to unleash an utterly mystical and utterly terrifying strike.

Rumble...

Suddenly, a loud sound rang out from outside. The entire Forest of Sword Pagodas began to tremble.

“Eh?” Puzzled, Ning opened his eyes to stare outside. The ground outside was trembling as that enormous sound boomed from far away.

“What's going on? The Forest of Sword Pagodas is the most sacred place of the Sword Palace. Who would dare cause trouble here?” Puzzled, Ning walked out of his thatched cottage and stared off into the distance.

“What was that?”

“Was that...?”

“Look!”

Dozens of cultivators within the Forest of Sword Pagodas rose to their feet. Some were at the World level, some were Daolords. In this moment, all of them stared at the area from where the disturbance was coming. At a distant part of the Forest of Sword Pagodas, the ground was booming loudly as it began to split apart. The tip of a pagoda was slowly emerging from underground and climbing higher and higher.

“A Sword Pagoda.”

“A new Sword Pagoda.”

“A new pagoda? We just gained yet another pagoda? Who was just acknowledged by the Sword Pagodas?” Everyone was excited.

They all understood what was going on. Only once you were acknowledged by the Sword Pagodas would the Forest of Sword Pagodas give birth to a brand new pagoda of your own. Countless eons had gone

by, but only around eighty thousand cultivators had ever been acknowledged by the Sword Pagodas, and in this day and age only six World-level cultivators had been acknowledged. They were, of course, the six exalted Swordlords.

Ning stared in astonishment as well. Although he had seen quite a few Sword Pagodas in the past, this was his first time seeing a new one rising.

That distant, newborn sword pagoda continued to rise upwards as the booming sounds rang out unabated. The entire Forest of Sword Pagodas was shuddering! Finally, the new Sword Pagoda came to a halt when it reached the same height as the other Sword Pagodas.

Whoosh.

Suddenly, countless sword-shadows began to fly out from throughout the Forest of Sword Pagodas. There had to be trillions of the things, and they all began to bow down in a certain direction.

“Uh?!” Ning was rather flabbergasted.

The countless sword-shadows from throughout the Forest were all bowing down towards Ning!

All of this had caused a great commotion, attracting the attention of quite a few Daolords and World-level cultivators of the Sword Palace, all of whom came flying over. As a result, many of the cultivators of the Sword Palace were able to personally bear witness as all of this happened.

“It is him?”

“Isn’t that junior apprentice-brother Darknorth?”

“His name is Darknorth?”

“Right, he’s a newcomer. He joined us less than a thousand years ago.”

“He’s still just at the World level, but he’s already received the acknowledgment of the Sword Pagodas?”

This stunning sight caused many of the cultivators present to begin to quietly chat amongst themselves. For a Daolord to be acknowledged by the Sword Pagodas was one thing, but for a World-level cultivator? This was

extremely, extremely rare. The entire Sword Palace only had six Swordlords. Now, Ji Ning had become the seventh.

“Junior apprentice-brother Darknorth, congratulations.”

“Congratulations, senior apprentice-brother Darknorth.”

“Senior apprentice-brother Darknorth, congratulations.”

“Junior apprentice-brother Darknorth.”

Many cultivators came over to offer their congratulations. In the Sword Palace, there was a huge dividing line between those who were acknowledged by the Sword Pagodas and those who were not! If you weren’t acknowledged by the Sword Pagodas, you would always be viewed as slightly inferior, even if you were a Daolord. As for those who were acknowledged? All of them were venerated.

Ning finally realized what was happening. His sword-stance just now had been acknowledged by the Forest of Sword Pagodas!

“Darknorth.” A deep voice rumbled out in Ning’s mind. “That new Sword Pagoda belongs to you. Only you are permitted to leave behind your sword-arts within it.”

“You are...?” Ning asked.

“I am the spirit of the Sword Palace,” the deep voice said.

Ning understood. Even the Starseizing Manor had given birth to a manor-spirit such as the giant yellow bear. It made sense that the Sword Palace had given birth to a sentient spirit as well.

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The Brightshore Kingdom’s imperial palace. The thirteen royal thrones.

A trace of emotion suddenly flickered through the face of the snowy-robed Hegemon. He smiled slightly, then looked at the nearby Lord Woodflower. “Woodflower, congratulations are in order for your Sword Palace. You just gained a new Swordlord.”

“Haha, it seems as though I was right about him.” Lord Woodflower

laughed merrily.

“What’s this?”

“A new Swordlord? Did yet another World-level cultivator of the Sword Palace receive the acknowledgement of the pagodas? Who is it?”

The other eleven golden-armored powers were all quite surprised.

Lord Woodflower said in a very smug manner, “It is Darknorth!”

“Darknorth? That kid who sparred against Bertulu?”

“When he battled against Bertulu, he specialized in defensive techniques and was quite good in that regard. However, he was quite a ways off from being at the level he would need to be to receive the acknowledgement of the Sword Pagodas.”

“This rate of improvement is crazy. Even if he was accelerating time to train a thousand times faster than normal... it has been less than a million years!” There had been many major powers who had witnessed Ning’s battle against Bertulu. Even the Hegemon had gone to watch! Although they had all been focusing on Bertulu, they naturally had also paid some attention to Bertulu’s opponent, Ji Ning.

The stronger one was, the more difficult it would be to accelerate the rate of time for one’s self. A thousand times the normal rate of time was already a ridiculously fast pace... but Ning had entered the Sword Palace less than a thousand years ago. That meant that even at a thousand times the normal rate of time, he would’ve been training for less than a million years.

In reality, Ning had only maintained a pace of a hundred times the normal rate of time.

“I said long ago that I had a good feeling about him. He truly is quite talented in sword-arts.” Lord Woodflower said in a very smug manner, “My Sword Palace has gained yet another Swordlord, which means we’ve gained yet another chance to be the ones to go to the alternate universe.”

“Yes, another candidate has appeared.” The almighty Hegemon nodded

as well.

Everyone acknowledged by the ancient pagodas were qualified to take part in the trials.

“Let’s see what sort of sword-arts he came up with to be acknowledged by those ancient pagodas.” The almighty Hegemon waved his finger. There had been sixty-six images in the air, and now a sixty-seventh image joined them. This image displayed the scene of a white-robed Ji Ning standing in front of a Sword Pagoda, staring at it curiously.

“Rewind.” The almighty Hegemon smiled as he watched, and the other twelve golden-armored figures watched closely as well. All of them were curious as to what type of sword-art this World-level cultivator had used to receive the acknowledgement of the Sword Pagodas.

Time began to reverse at high speed until the image returned to the time when Ning had just executed his sword-stance.

The image showed Ning seated in the lotus position within his thatched cottage. Ning gently flicked out a single finger in a seemingly simple manner, but the strike was indescribably profound. Slash! The strike shot out into the distant skies above him.

# Chapter 14: The Eternal Emperor Closest to the Hegemons

“Hrm?” The almighty Hegemon sat amongst the thirteen thrones, and both his face and the faces of the twelve golden-armored powers around him tightened. The almighty Hegemon actually once more took control over the flows of time to cause the earlier scene to replay once more. Ji Ning once more flicked out his finger...

“No mistaking it. That’s the [Heartsword] sword-art.” The almighty Hegemon nodded slowly.

“Darknorth actually trains in the [Heartsword]?” Daolord Thousand Waves was somewhat speechless.

“Impressive.”

“I thought he must’ve created a new sword-stance that received the acknowledgement of the pagodas. I didn’t expect that it was actually due to him executing the [Heartsword].” The golden-armored major powers present were all rather surprised. It must be understood that there was a difference between using your own sword-arts and using someone else’s. A self-created sword-art would generally be a bit more powerful.

When Ji Ning had mastered the Reincarnation stance of the [Heartseal], he could’ve chosen to develop a sword-stance of his own that would also be acknowledged by the Sword Pagodas. However, he was in no rush to do so. Instead, he had decided to meditate on the even more difficult and profound [Nameless] sword-art. The seventh stance of the [Nameless] sword-art had an extremely powerful sword-intent, and so when Ning executed it his burst of sword-intent was acknowledged by the pagodas.

“He has merely learned the sword-arts of another.” The almighty Hegemon shook his head slightly. “Only if he reaches this level through his own power and own skills would he be considered a truly dazzling figure.”

“Agreed.”

“Right.”

The golden-armored powers all nodded. Long ago, a person had been able to use the [Heartsword] to reach the apex of power and become an Eternal Emperor, but that didn’t mean that Ji Ning would be able to walk the same path. In addition, Ji Ning had only gained an elementary understanding of this sword-art.

“Woodflower.” The almighty Hegemon looked at the nearby Lord Woodflower.

“Hegemon.” Lord Woodflower nodded respectfully.

“Go give that young fellow a gentle reminder,” the almighty Hegemon instructed. “In the future, when he finds his own Dao and his own path, he should merge his heartforce and his sword-arts together and pour them both into his Dao! But of course, that’s just a suggestion. His own path will of course be up to him to choose.”

“Understood.” Lord Woodflower nodded.

A distant look appeared in the Hegemon’s eyes, and he murmured softly, “When Emperor Heartsword suddenly descended upon the world, he challenged all three of us Hegemons, then wandered off into parts unknown...”

The twelve golden-armored figures all listened attentively.

Emperor Heartsword was indeed a legendary figure. He was a legend who was roughly comparable in power to the three mighty Hegemons! However, his rise to prominence was just as sudden as his disappearance. Prior to him becoming a Verge-level Daolord, he didn’t really have much of a reputation. He was a very low-key figure, and it was said that he lived the life of an ordinary commoner in a distant chaosworld.

However, once he became a Daolord of the Fourth Step, a feud resulted in him slaying more than twenty Daolords in a row, and he even completely crushed and wiped out a large enemy sect. This action had shocked the Endless Territories, resulting in his rise to fame. Shortly afterwards, he succeeded in his Daomerge and gained eternity.

After gaining eternity, he immediately went and challenged each of the other Eternal Emperors. He won every single battle! However, he didn't kill a single one of them.

After that, he challenged the three ancient Hegemons.

Ever since the most ancient of days, the three ancient Hegemons had stood at the very apex of the Endless Territories. No one had ever been able to shake their positions. No one knew what the results of those duels had been. When asked, Emperor Heartsword simply said one thing: "I lost."

However, one of the three ancient Hegemons, the one belonging to the Ancient cultivators, had said something else: "His power is comparable to ours."

This phrase guaranteed that Emperor Heartsword would become a legend! However, despite his quick rise to prominence and the many waves he had caused, he disappeared just as quickly. Despite that, most later cultivators acclaimed him as being the Eternal Emperor who was closest to the level of the three Hegemons, and his [Heartsword] style was venerated by many. Alas, he had never transmitted his [Heartsword] sword-art to any disciples. The only thing he did was leave behind a complete copy of the [Heartsword] sword-art to the Dao Alliance before he disappeared on his journey.

The [Heartsword] tome became a precious treasure of the Dao Alliance. All the copies of this tome circulating in the outside world were all fragmentary, with only the tome in the possession of the Dao Alliance being genuine. Other organizations such as the Brightshore Kingdom would never be given access to a complete [Heartsword] manual, no matter what price they offered to pay.

"His sword-arts... although he reached an extremely high level of proficiency in the Dao of the Sword, some of the most freakishly talented Daolords, the ones capable of slaying Eternal Emperors, were superior to him in that regard." The almighty Hegemon sighed. "His strength lay in the fact that he was actually able to almost perfectly merge his power as a

Heartforce Cultivator and as a Fiendgod Body Refiner. That is why he had such tremendous power.”

“Right.” The twelve golden-armored figures all nodded.

Logically speaking, Heartforce Cultivation, Fiendgod Body Refining, and Ki Refining were three completely separate paths that couldn’t merge together.

Take Bertulu as an example. In battle, he could use some illusions or use his heartworld to pressure his foes. In short, he would use heartforce as a supportive skill as he engaged in close combat!

However...

Emperor Heartsword was different. When he used his divine abilities and struck out with his sword, he was able to unleash tremendous power. As for his heartforce, he was able to use its illusions to affect reality itself. Most importantly, he was somehow able to cause his heartforce to naturally join together with his sword. This made it so that he was able to perfectly meld his power as a Heartforce Cultivator and as a Fiendgod Refiner, causing his power to skyrocket to a terrifying level. This was why he was acclaimed by so many as the Eternal Emperor who was closest to the three Hegemons in power.

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The Sword Palace.

“Congratulations, senior apprentice-brother Darknorth.”

“Senior apprentice-brother Darknorth, now that you’ve been acknowledged by the Sword Pagodas, you are the seventh Swordlord of our palace.”

Ning was in a superb mood as he entertained his fellow disciples. Suddenly, he saw a figure appear at the margins of the Forest of Sword Pagodas.

“Senior apprentice-brother Woodflower?” Ning immediately recognized him.

“Follow me, Darknorth.” Lord Woodflower sent him a mental message.

“Everyone, the Palace Lord has summoned me. Pardon me.” Ning said a few words of farewell to the cultivators nearby. They, too, had seen Lord Woodflower appear.

A short while later, Ning and Lord Woodflower were walking side by side through a mountainous forest.

“Darknorth, you have received the acknowledgement of the Sword Pagodas and become a Swordlord. Per our rules, you are permitted to go to Armaments Gorge and choose a single treasure that doesn’t cost more than a million cubes of chaos nectar,” Lord Woodflower said. “This is a special rule the Sword Palace created for the benefit of our Swordlords. Only Swordlords are given this benefit.”

Ning’s eyes lit up. No more than a million cubes? What an enormously generous offer!

It made sense. Swordlords were capable of becoming Daolords at any time, and they would be extraordinary Daolords once they made their breakthrough. They were worth the cost.

“Oh, right. Now that you are a Swordlord, there is something I must tell you.” Lord Woodflower smiled. “All of the World-level cultivators in the Twelve Palaces who have been acknowledged by their respective pagodas are preparing for a very special opportunity which has come before you.”

“A special opportunity?” Ning was puzzled.

“Right. In the end, only four World-level cultivators in the Twelve Palaces will be given this special opportunity.” Lord Woodflower looked at Ning. “This truly is a stroke of tremendous fortune for you. None of the Twelve Palaces have access to this. In all the Endless Territories, most likely only the exalted Hegemon is capable of bringing this opportunity before you. If it wasn’t for the sake of a newcomer who recently joined his clan, the almighty Hegemon definitely wouldn’t give us this chance.”

Lord Woodflower knew very well that in the Hegemon’s heart, what mattered the most was his imperial clan.

Only for the sake of his Brightshore Imperials was the almighty Hegemon was willing to make use of this opportunity! The reason why he was giving the Twelve Palaces four of the medallions was partially because they were subordinates, but also for the sake of giving that young Imperial four assistants! Although the chance to enter the Archaeus region of the alternate universe was an incredible opportunity, it was also extremely dangerous. Tremendous opportunity always came with tremendous danger.

“There should be many in the Twelve Palaces who have been acknowledged by their pagodas. Only four will have a chance?” NIng was puzzled.

“Just four.” Lord Woodflower sighed. “I’m worried that our Sword Palace won’t be able to get so much as a single slot.”

“You’ve just recently been acknowledged and haven’t spent much time in our Sword Palace, so it wouldn’t really matter if you fail. However, you should still do your best. According to what the Hegemon said, the strongest four shall be given this tremendous opportunity,” Lord Woodflower said. Frankly speaking, he really didn’t have much faith in Ning. Although Ning had been acknowledged by the Sword Pagodas, so had the other six Swordlords.

“In roughly one century, the almighty Hegemon will select the four strongest candidates,” Lord Woodflower finished.

“A century?” Ning nodded secretly. It seemed as though it was indeed time for him to make some preparations.

“Oh, right. Do you know the name of the sword-art you used to gain acknowledgement from the Sword Pagodas?” Lord Woodflower looked at Ning.

Ning shook his head. “I do not. I obtained this sword-art by accident. Because I don’t know what its true name was, I’ve been calling it the [Nameless] sword-art this entire time. Do you know its true name, senior apprentice-brother Woodflower?” Ning’s eyes became filled with an eager blaze. When Ning had executed the seventh stance, the Cosmic Heart

stance, he had noticed that although it was harder to use than Emperor Mirrorsnow's Reincarnation stance, the two were actually on the same level when it came to the profundity of their insights into the Dao of the Sword. The tough part of the Cosmic Heart stance lay in how ephemeral and unpredictable it was. One had to follow one's own heart, allowing one's heartforce to perfectly merge into one's sword-stances.

Ning was quite talented in heartforce. Although his heartforce wasn't at a very strong level, he was still able to execute the stance.

If he had been more skilled in heartforce, the power of this stance would've been much greater. This would have been especially true if he had reached the sixth stage of heartforce and established his own Heartworld.

"This is a sword-art which perfectly combines Heartforce Cultivation with the Dao of the Sword." After executing this stance, Ning immediately understood what made this sword-art so valuable. He instantly grew eager to learn more.

"I do indeed know its name." Lord Woodflower nodded. "This sword-art was created and passed down by a powerful Eternal Emperor who was nearly as strong as the Hegemon."

# Chapter 15: Preparations

Ji Ning was delighted to hear this. Finally, he was going to learn about the history of the [Nameless] sword-art.

Lord Woodflower continued, "This Eternal Emperor was known as Emperor Heartsword. His rise to power was sudden, and for a brief period of time he was the most dazzling, celebrated figure of the Endless Territories. However, shortly after he revealed his brilliance he elected to disappear as he adventured through parts unknown. He was so strong that he was most likely the Eternal Emperor who was closest to the three Hegemons in power."

"Ah." Ning nodded.

After mastering the seventh stance of the [Nameless] sword-art, he realized that although the sword-art itself was on the same level of profundity as Emperor Mirrorsnow's, Emperor Heartsword's strength lay in the fact that he was able to perfectly fuse his heartforce into his sword-arts. It made the power of his sword-arts increase dramatically to a point where he was unquestionably much more powerful than Emperor Mirrorsnow had been. It made sense for him to be comparable to the three almighty Hegemons.

It wasn't that Emperor Mirrorsnow was weak. He had developed the Reincarnation stance at the World level and used it to break through to become a Daolord. If he had been at the Forest of Sword Pagodas, his self-created Reincarnation stance would've been acknowledged by the Sword Pagodas! Someone who relied on this sword-art as the base of his breakthrough to Daolord would be able to immediately battle ordinary Daolords of the Second Step.

But of course, Bertulu and Eastcult were even more freakishly talented. Once they broke through, they would be able to match Daolords of the Third Step! However, the harder one's path was, the more difficult it would be for one to become an Eternal Emperor! The more freakishly talented you were, the harder it would be for you to become an Eternal Emperor.

This was why, despite the passage of countless years, there were only three Hegemons.

“What were his sword-arts named?” Ning asked.

“Prior to disappearing, he left behind a complete copy of his sword-arts with the Dao Alliance. He named it the [Heartsword].” Lord Woodflower continued, “Only the Dao Alliance has a complete copy of this sword-art.”

“Only the Dao Alliance?” Ning was rather disappointed.

“Yes, because this is the one and only sword-art which allows Heartforce Cultivators to completely merge their power with Fiendgod Body Refiners and Ki Refiners and then gain eternity,” Lord Woodflower said.

Fiendgod Refiners would be able to perfectly merge the heartforce into their sword-arts and then enter close combat.

Ki Refiners would be able to perfectly merge the heartforce into their flying swords as well.

“A sword-art which can rival Hegemons, with only one complete copy... its only natural that the Dao Alliance would never transmit it to outsiders. No matter what price our Brightshore Kingdom offered to pay, they refused to let us have a copy. Something like this sword-art isn’t something which mere treasures can be used to trade for. A sword-art like that is one of the fundamental pillars on which entire organizations rest.” Lord Woodflower continued, “The outside world only has incomplete, fragmentary records. How many stances do you have?”

“Just seven,” Ning said.

Lord Woodflower looked rather disappointed. “The first seven stances were created by Eternal Emperor Heartsword before he was a Daolord, and they are the seven most commonly known stances. I was hoping that you might’ve encountered something special. Oh, right. Have you gone to the Ancient Library? The library holds a fragmentary record that includes the first ten stances of the [Heartsword] manual.”

“The Ancient Library has it?” Ning was instantly delighted. The Ancient Library simply had far too many sword-arts within it, including tens of

millions of fragmentary sword-arts. Each one could only be read through the usage of godsense. Even if you could fully review a thousand scrolls a day, it would still take over a hundred years for you to go through everything.

“Our Brightshore Kingdom had to pay a hefty price in order to purchase these ten stances, and we’re allowed to teach them to others,” Lord Woodflower said. “You are a cultivator, after all. I’m sure you’ll have some connections to the Dao Alliance and eventually be able to gain entry into it. At that point in time, if you spent a bit of chaos nectar you’ll be able to purchase the complete [Heartsword] sutra.”

Ning nodded. He was a member of Vastheaven Palace, which meant that he actually had quite a deep connection to the Dao Alliance.

“Make your preparations. You have a hundred years, at which point the Twelve Palaces will choose select just the four strongest World-level experts for this opportunity.” Lord Woodflower smiled as he delivered this message.

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After parting with Lord Woodflower, Ning immediately headed towards the Ancient Library. The Ancient Library was filled with tens of millions of sword-arts. Ning scanned the place with his godsense and was quickly able to discover a jade slip that had the words ‘Heartsword Sutra’ atop it. In the past, Ning didn’t realize what it was, but now he realized that this [Heartsword] tome contained the ‘nameless’ sword-art he trained in.

“It really is the same.” As Ning picked up the jade slip and sent his godsense into it, a large amount of information flooded into his memories. This really did contain the first ten stances, as well as some explanations regarding this sword-art.

The complete version of this sword-art contained fifteen stances. The first seven stances had been created by Emperor Heartsword prior to becoming a Daolord, and he used the seventh stance to reach the Samsara Daolord level. Afterwards, he used his fifteenth stance to become an Eternal Emperor.

“It is even more profound than I believed it to be.” After Ning viewed the ‘final’ three stances, he couldn’t help but sigh. Actually, anyone could tell that they were the same technique. The very first stance of this sword-art was named the Heartsword stance, after all!

The Heartsword stance had exceedingly high requirements with regard’s to one’s mind and heart. The user had to make his mind one with both the sword and the world around it, gaining absolute mastery over the sword.

The various later stances also had very high requirements with regards to both the sword and the heart.

The sixth stance, ‘Unicorn’s Heart’, was even more profound and abstruse than the Heartsword stance. One had to find that ephemeral feeling which was so difficult to grasp.

The seventh stance was even better. The Cosmic Heart allowed for one to perfectly activate and infuse one’s heartforce into the sword-art. When the sword struck out, it was like a tear shed for a person you loved.

“His sword-arts actually aren’t that profound, compared to the most supreme major powers of the Dao of the Sword.” Ning had seen many things in the Forest of Sword Pagodas, and his horizons had been correspondingly expanded. “However, the mysteries of how he merged his heartforce with his sword-arts are worthy of further exploration.”

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The Twelve Palaces. The Palace of Fire.

“Have you heard? Just today, a World God in the Sword Palace named Ji Ning was acknowledged by the pagodas.”

“Ah? A World-level cultivator was acknowledged? What a freak.”

“He would be the seventh Swordlord of the Sword Palace, right?”

Some of the black-armored Daolords who were on patrol were chatting with each other. News spread throughout the Twelve Palaces quite quickly. It must be understood that there were only around sixty World-level cultivators who had been acknowledged by the ancient pagodas.

Generally speaking, only one such cultivator would appear every trillion years. Anyone acknowledged by the pagodas was destined to be a truly extraordinary Daolord.

“What a freak. I can’t even get into the Fire Palace, but those freaks are actually able to receive the acknowledgment of the ancient pagodas.” Some of the World-level cultivators in front of the Fire Palace began to discuss this matter as well, and many of them sighed with frustration and envy.

“Fellow Daoist, what do you mean by ‘acknowledgment of the pagodas’?” A tall, skinny, jade-haired youth spoke out.

“Let me explain. Joining the Twelve Palaces isn’t that impressive, as some of their members aren’t even able to become Daolords! Even if your insights into the Dao are so profound that you can become a Daolord whenever you wish, you still aren’t that impressive! Only those who reach truly incredible heights are acknowledged by the resonance of the pagodas. From what I’ve heard, those World-level cultivators who are acknowledged by the pagodas can not only break through whenever they wish, once they do so they will immediately be comparable to Daolords of the Second Step in power.”

“What? They are able to break through whenever they wish, and will immediately be comparable to Daolords of the Second Step?” Quite a few World-level cultivators were stunned by this, and they all began to chat amongst themselves.

“Eh?”

“Darknorth?”

Outside the Fire Palace was a large group of cultivators who wished to take the trials to join the Fire Palace, and two of them were individuals who Ning was quite familiar with. One was Su Youji the Flamefairy while the other was World God Pillsaint. They had tried many times in recent years but were still unable to enter the Palace of Fire.

“Master was acknowledged by the ancient pagodas?” Su Youji was instantly overjoyed to hear this. “Incredible. Master is simply incredible.”

All other thoughts flew out of Su Youji's mind as she immediately turned and ran towards the Fire Palace's spacetime transfer array. She was going to go back to the Sword Palace. Her master had achieved such a great thing. How could she, his retainer, not be there to congratulate him?

"Is that brother Darknorth?" The chubby World God Pillsaint was stunned. "The Sword Palace? It has to be the Darknorth that I know. He once told me that he is going to join the Sword Palace. The Sword Palace doesn't have that many World-level cultivators in it. There's no way someone else will have the same Daoist title as him. Ugh, I've been training for years but still am not able to enter the Fire Palace. I might as well join brother Darknorth instead."

World God Pillsaint quickly made up his mind, then turned and began to hasten towards the spacetime transfer array. Even assuming he didn't wish to become Ji Ning's retainer, he still would've gone to congratulate Ning on his success. Ning had shown him kindness, after all.

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Whoosh. A few hours later Su Youji and World God Pillsaint, along with a few other cultivators, rode the spacetime transfer array from the Fire Palace to the Sword Palace.

Su Youji rushed straight into the Sword Palace. As Ji Ning's retainer, she was permitted to go straight into the Sword Palace.

As for World God Pillsaint, he informed the black-armored Daolord who sought to bar his path, "Senior, I wish to meet with Swordlord Darknorth. I am his good friend."

"He wishes to meet Swordlord Darknorth?" Su Youji, who had rushed on ahead, couldn't help but turn back and glance at the chubby World God Pillsaint.

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A short while later.

Within an Immortal estate located at the peak of a mountain. Ji Ning, Su Youji, and Pillsaint were all seated facing each other.

“Youji, this gentleman is the World God Pillsaint who I mentioned to you before.” Ning laughed. “In the Astral Islands, he was my very first competitor.”

World God Pillsaint looked rather embarrassed. He hurriedly said, “I really didn’t know my own limits. Thankfully, you showed mercy to me, Daoist brother Darknorth. Otherwise, I’d be dead.”

Ning chuckled. “It was a sign that destiny binds the two of us.”

“Right, right. Bound by destiny!” World God Pillsaint grinned at Ning. “Daoist brother Darknorth, I have nowhere to go in the Brightshore Kingdom. I’ve tried a few times to enter the Palace of Fire, but I’ve failed each time. And so, I’m planning to give up and join you instead. Am I lucky enough to be accepted?”

“Follow me?” Ning was startled, but he then said with a laugh, “If you don’t mind joining me, I’d naturally be willing to welcome you. Others would beg for the chance to take such a master alchemist as a retainer.”

“Then it is settled!” World God Pillsaint immediately and straightforwardly swore a lifeblood oath. His oath was one of the fairly common retainer oaths that were sworn in the Endless Territories. Generally speaking, retainer oaths were fairly relaxed. Ning was able to break through to become a Daolord whenever he wished, and would be an extraordinary Daolord at that. Someone like him was definitely qualified to take on World God Pillsaint as a retainer.

“Pillsaint greets you, Master.” World God Pillsaint bowed respectfully.

“Enough, enough. There’s no need for the two of you to go through these pointless courtesies.” Ning smiled. The very first time he saw World God Pillsaint, he had a good feeling about the man. Now, the chubby-cheeked, rosy-faced youth who wore all his feelings on his sleeve had become his retainer. Quite frankly, World-level cultivators who were so genuine and guileless were quite rare.

“Whew. I finally have a backer now. Life in the Brightshore Kingdom really has pissed me off lately.” World God Pillsaint let out a sigh.

“Flamefairy, we didn’t know each other when we first met, but now we follow and serve the same master.” World God Pillsaint glanced towards the nearby Su Youji as he spoke.

“Uh huh.” The Flamefairy nodded.

“Can’t you be a bit more talkative?” World God Pillsaint felt speechless. The Flamefairy glanced at him and chuckled, but she didn’t say anything else.

As for Ning, he said, “Right. There’s something I need you two to do for me.”

“Please instruct us, Master.” World God Pillsaint and Su Youji both spoke out at the same time. Su Youji felt rather excited. It was quite rare for Ning to assign her any tasks.

“A great opportunity is coming, and I have a small shot at getting it. I have to do everything I can to prepare for it,” Ning said. “I’m planning to sell a treasure known as the Bloodfire Cloudfruit. It’ll be up to you to help me sell it.”

The Bloodfire Cloudfruit was the most valuable treasure he had on him.

# Chapter 16: Treasure Selling

“Bloodfire Cloudfruit?” Su Youji was puzzled.

“Bloodfire Cloudfruit!” World God Pillsaint’s eyes bulged out as he called out in shock.

“You know of it?” Su Youji turned to look at World God Pillsaint.

World God Pillsaint hurriedly nodded, too excited to act smug. “That’s one hell of a treasure. It is a unique fruit which can only be formed under very special conditions. It has marvelous properties, and cultivators who walk the Dao of Fire all dream of possessing something like it. But of course, it wouldn’t work for you. You Ki Refiners are too physically weak; there’s no way your bodies could possibly withstand the enormous amounts of energy the Bloodfire Cloudfruit contains. Only Fiendgod Body Refiners are able to endure its energy, which they can then use to forcibly convert their bodies into fire-attribute bodies. By then, they would be able to easily take control over Chaos fire and ride it to escape. Most likely, even Daolords would not be able to catch up to them.”

“It’s that amazing?” Su Youji was rather shocked. Not even Daolords would be able to catch up?

“If I sold it to Armaments Gorge, I’d be able to sell it for a million cubes of chaos nectar,” Ning said. “However, I’m hoping for a higher price. That’s why I’d like for you to help me spread the news of this treasure to the black-armored Daolords. They’ll definitely discuss it amongst themselves and with many others. Soon, everyone in the Twelve Palaces will know, and I’m sure there will be some who would be willing to pay a high price for the Bloodfire Cloudfruit.”

“Selling for a high price? Easy! Leave it to me.” Pillsaint was quite confident.

“Just spread the news as widely as you can. Even if a Daolord wishes to speak to me personally, just have them give you the bid,” Ning said. “A hundred years from now, I will leave the Forest of Sword Pagodas and choose the highest bidder, giving the Bloodfire Cloudfruit to him or her.”

“Alright.”

“Understood.”

Pillsaint and Su Youji were both a bit excited. Although this was a simple task, it was still a task that involved a million cubes of chaos nectar. They couldn't help but be filled with enthusiasm.

“Alright. I'm heading to the Forest of Sword Pagodas.” Ning rose to his feet.

“Am I now allowed to enter and exit the Sword Palace freely?” Pillsaint was a bit worried about this. Just now, Ning had personally guided him through the palace, which was why the Sword Palace's defenses had not automatically attacked him.

“Don't worry. The spirit of the Sword Palace was able to see you becoming my retainer,” Ning said. The rules of the Sword Palace were that each formal disciple was permitted to grant two retainers free entry to and from the Sword Palace. Su Youji and Pillsaint were now both able to enter and leave freely, but Ning wouldn't be able to grant this permission to a third retainer.

Swish.

Ning transformed into a streak of light and flew out the gates of Immortal estate and towards the Forest of Sword Pagodas.

Pillsaint and Su Youji watched as Ning left. Both of them felt a sense of pressure. Although this was a simple task, it still involved a great deal of wealth!

“As his new retainer, I need to make sure I handle this well,” Pillsaint mused silently.

“I've never been able to help out Master much. I can't let him down.” Su Youji felt the same sense of pressure.

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The Forest of Sword Pagodas.

Ning set out his temporal acceleration cottage, then sat down in the

lotus position and began to cultivate.

"I hope I'll be able to garner a high price for it. I don't really have many valuable treasures on me right now," Ning mused. Although he did have a few Eternal weapons, there was nothing special about them. The only other item he owned which was worth over a hundred thousand cubes of chaos nectar was the spare Mirrorsnow Painting. When Ning left the Astral Islands and headed towards the Sword Palace, he had acquired a spare from the underwater creatures. However, Ning was in no rush to sell if. If he really did need money, he could sell it then. If he waited for a good opportunity, he might be able to sell it for a better price.

Still, the truth was that Ning really didn't have many items he could sell for a high price.

As for the Bloodfire Cloudfruit...

The Twelve Palaces actually weren't the best place to sell it, because almost all of its major powers were wandering the outside world. The Sword Palace theoretically had over a hundred Daolords, not including the black-armored ones, but almost all of them were out adventuring. Only ten or so were here at the Sword Palace. This was simply how the Twelve Palaces worked. As a result, there would be less competition resulting in lower prices for Ning.

If this was one of the places where many major powers of the Dao Alliance congregated, the price would probably be much better.

Alas, by the time Ning reached such a place he would probably have already become a Daolord. By then, even if he did sell the Bloodfire Cloudfruit for a high price it wouldn't be of much use to him.

Time flowed on.

Pillsaint and Su Youji spread the word, causing the news that Swordlord Darknorth of the Sword Palace wished to sell a Bloodfire Cloudfruit to spread throughout the Twelve Palaces.

"Bloodfire Cloudfruit?"

The people most excited to hear this naturally all belonged to the World-

level cultivators and Daolords of the Palace of Fire, although virtually all of the World-level cultivators could do nothing more dream about it. These individuals all walked the Dao of Fire. If they had fire-attribute bodies, they would be able to cultivate much more quickly. They were thus the most suitable candidates for purchasing this item.

“Bloodfire Cloudfruit?”

The Saber Palace, Heartforce Palace, Sword Palace, Spacetime Palace, and other palaces also held Daolords and World-level cultivators who were interested.

Ning, for example, was a member of the Sword Palace who had a body that was lightning-attribute in nature.

But of course, those who walked the Dao of Water or the Dao of Metal would never procure fire-attribute bodies. That would make it twice as hard to cultivate, with half the effect. The fire-attribute body would disrupt their affinity to those Daos.

“That kid, Swordlord Darknorth, plans to sell it off within a hundred years? He’s probably doing this to prepare for the upcoming opportunity. Heh heh... fellow Daoists, there’s no need for us to bid up the price too much. He’s definitely going to sell it no matter what. Let’s keep the price low.” Instantly, some Daolords came up with this idea. There were some Daolords in the Twelve Palaces who walked the path of evil. In fact, some had committed tremendous sins and atrocities. Although the lifeblood oath prevented them from acting against Ning, they were still able to do something like lowball him for his treasures.

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“The highest bid stands at 1.3 million cubes!” Pillsaint made this claim within an Immortal estate within the Sword Palace.

“What?” The old man frowned, his entire body emanating an aura of explosive, ruinous energy. “Who made such a high bid?”

“I can’t reveal that,” Pillsaint said placidly. “If your bid isn’t any higher than this, there’s no point in even bidding.”

“You punk.” The old man was irritated. He turned away and departed.

“Pillsaint.” Su Youji watched the old man walk away, then sent Pillsaint a stealthy mental message. “You lied to him. What if no one ends up bidding a higher price? We’ll be in trouble.”

“Don’t worry.” Pillsaint was quite confident.

Pillsaint and Su Youji had both noticed that the Daolords were in no rush to place any bids. Ning had given a limit of a hundred years, after all; they didn’t want to get the price too high, too early. In fact, some of the Daolords were colluding in secret to keep the price low.

Half a year later, the old man returned.

“I’m willing to bid 1.31 million cubes,” the old man said.

“The highest price is now 1.33 million cubes,” Pillsaint said, his eyes wide and innocent.

“Ah?!” The old man was stunned.

Pillsaint continued to raise the price. 1.33 million cubes, 1.35 million cubes, 1.36 million cubes, 1.37 million cubes... every half a year or year, the price would rise slightly.

Faced with the continuously rising price, some of the Daolords that were colluding began to grow a bit impatient.

“Who the hell keeps upping their bids?”

“Why are the bids continuing to rise?”

They were able to keep calm when the price was steady, but this constant rise made some of them a bit impatient.

Pillsaint secretly felt quite smug about this. “You have no idea who you are dealing with. I’m a grandmaster alchemist! I’m not just skilled in making pills, I’m also an expert in selling them.” There was a certain art to selling pills and treasures as well, and there was always a bit of artifice built into the prices. Many of the ‘bids’ for the fruit were false, but Pillsaint did manage to lure in a few real bids as well.

A hundred years passed in the blink of an eye.

“The highest price is now 1.46 million cubes! This is the final year,” Pillsaint declared. “My master will return from the Forest of Sword Pagodas anytime now. When he does return, the auction will come to an end. The highest bidder will win the Bloodfire Cloudfruit.”

“What? The auction will end as soon as his master leaves the Forest?”

“This is the final year. Swordlord Darknorth might return at any moment.”

Even the most patient of Daolords were no longer able to hold on. Once Ji Ning returned, they would have missed this opportunity for good. They didn’t believe that Pillsaint was lying, because no one would dare lie to so many Daolords at the closing time of an auction.

“I’m willing to offer 1.47 million cubes.”

“I’ll offer 1.48 million.”

“1.5 million.”

In the final year, the bids increased very rapidly. Some of the Daolords had truly grown impatient. Once they gained this treasure, more than 99% of the other Daolords would be unable to catch up to them in speed. Generally speaking, not even Verge-level Daolords would be able to fly as quickly as Chaos fire or Chaos lightning! Only those who had techniques allowing them to control Chaos fire or Chaos lightning would be the exceptions. Once this opportunity went past, who knew how long it would be before the next opportunity? Even if another opportunity did arise, it was entirely possible that they wouldn’t even have a chance to bid on it. The Endless Territories were simply too vast; by the time they heard the news, the thing probably would’ve been sold already.

Pillsaint went so far as to run over to the Forest of Sword Pagodas to send Ning a secret message. “Master, don’t be in a rush to return. Give me another half year. Come back then.”

“Alright.” Ning trusted them.

Some of the Daolords truly did need this treasure, and time was running out. Once this sort of naturally-occurring treasure was gone, it would be eons before anything one appeared. The bidding process became noticeably fiercer.

Ning finally emerged from the Forest of Sword Pagodas.

“How did it go?” Ning descended from the skies into the Immortal estate where Su Youji and Pillsaint were located.

“1.8 million cubes,” Pillsaint said proudly.

“What?!” Ning was quite surprised. If he sold it to a major organization, the price would’ve been roughly a million cubes. If he was lucky and many Daolords desperately bid against each other, the price could be several times higher. However, there weren’t many Daolords in the Twelve Palaces right now. To be able to sell it for 1.8 million cubes already vastly exceeded Ning’s expectations. He had thought that a price of 1.5 million cubes would already be quite high.

# Chapter 17: A Thousand Years

The imperial palace of the Brightshore Kingdom.

The almighty Hegemon stared at the sixty-seven images hovering in the air next to the thirteen thrones. He said softly, “A thousand years has concluded.”

The twelve golden-armored powers who had been chatting idly, meditating with eyes closed, or silently drinking wine all came alert.

“Hegemon, how shall you choose the most powerful ones?” The twelve golden-armored powers all looked at the almighty Hegemon.

These World-level cultivators who had been acknowledged by the ancient pagodas were all incredible figures who possessed varied skills. What was the fairest way to choose the ‘best’ four?

The almighty Hegemon gently stroked his snow-white beard, then smiled. “Let them challenge the Daolord Cloudworld. They will have three days! The four who make it the farthest in the Daolord Cloudworld shall gain this opportunity.”

“Challenge the Daolord Cloudworld?” The twelve instantly understood.

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Ji Ning was seated in the lotus position within his spacetime acceleration cottage, still located in the ancient Forest of Sword Pagodas within the Sword Palace.

“Darknorth, come to me right away.” A voice rang out in Ning’s mind.

“Eh?” Ning opened his eyes. Dim flickers of sharp light could be seen within them. “A thousand years has concluded. It seems it is time for the actual challenge.”

Ning’s sword-arts were now far more formidable than when he had first developed the Reincarnation stance or the Cosmic Heart stance. His sword-arts were actually still continuing to improve, and he hadn’t encountered any bottlenecks yet. Alas, he simply didn’t have enough time!

The almighty Hegemon had only given him a thousand years.

Whoosh. Ning put away his spacetime acceleration treasure, then flew out of the Forest of Sword Pagodas and towards Lord Woodflower's palace.

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Lord Woodflower was seated in the lotus position atop a golden-red prayer mat. In front of him were seven similarly seated cultivators. There was one who looked like a child, one who looked like a youngster, one who looked like a youth, and even an old man. They all had completely different auras of the Sword Dao. A cultivator's age or mentality couldn't be judged by their appearances. At this level, there were some cultivators who reached an elderly age before suddenly shining with brilliance and embarking upon the path of cultivation.

"A thousand years has concluded." Lord Woodflower swept Ning and the others with his gaze. "The seven of you are the only ones within our Sword Palace have been acknowledged by our ancient pagodas. Right now, in the Twelve Palaces there are a total of sixty-seven individuals on your level, yourselves included. All of you will be fighting for this opportunity.

"Sixty-seven challengers, only four spots.

"The almighty Hegemon has already sent word for you to go and challenge the Daolord Cloudworld. You must complete your attempt within three days, and the final four who make it farthest into the Cloudworld shall be the ones to win this opportunity," Lord Woodflower said.

Ji Ning, Swordlord Wildfire, Swordlord Graceless, and the others all became more alert. They were all going to do their absolute best, and indeed training in the Dao of the Sword itself was training in a path of no return.

"In the Twelve Palaces, the World-level cultivators of the Saber Palace are the strongest, while the Heartforce Palace and the Spacetime Palace also have immeasurably deep roots." Lord Woodflower's gaze fell upon the seven Swordlords once more. "I hope that our Sword Palace can gain at least one of the slots. It would be a damn shame if we gained nothing at

all from this.”

“Understood.” Ning and the others were all very solemn. They weren’t angered or offended by Lord Woodflower’s words. Given their achievements, all of them were extraordinary figures who knew the importance of respecting their opponents. The other competitors had all been acknowledged by the ancient pagodas as well. Some were special lifeforms, and some had experienced tremendous strokes of karmic luck. None could be belittled or underestimated.

“I can only do my best.” Ning’s heart was firm with the resolve to do battle and test himself against these other acknowledged World-level opponents. Although the battle hadn’t started yet, Ning was already beginning to feel excitement and energy coursing through his veins.

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“Palace Lord Dawnstar is the undisputed most powerful Daolord of the Twelve Palaces. Even if we factor in all the other organizations of the Endless Territories, he would be ranked the second most powerful Daolord. He personally tutored all of you for many years. If only one of you gains a slot, even I will feel ashamed on your behalf.” Daolord Yinwind’s voice was filled with icy arrogance. This was his natural, innate disposition.

When he was a young mortal, he had been kidnapped and dragged into an incredibly powerful but evil sect, filled with all sorts of viledoers and evil men. But of course, this was something that happened long ago, and by now a simple breath from him would be enough to wipe out that evil sect. He was now a Deputy Palace Lord of the Saber Palace, and his name and reputation held tremendous influence within the Endless Territories.”

“Don’t worry, Lord Yinwind.”

“Forget two, let’s try for all four!”

The Saberlords of the Saber Palace were brimming with confidence.

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The sixty-seven waiting World-level challengers all received word from

their respective elders. Some headed for the Daolord Cloudworld immediately, while some calmed themselves and planned on making the challenge on the final day.

The trials of the Daolord Cloudworld could actually be completed quite quickly. Generally speaking, half a day was enough.

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### The Heartforce Palace.

The Palace of the Heart was extremely quiet. There were pitifully few cultivators at either the World level or the Daolord level, and only one of them had been acknowledged by the Heart Pagodas: Heartlord Solewind.

"I'm the only one taking part in the Heart Palace. How lonely." A bald, red-vested youth whose face was covered with strange, crimson divine tattoos smiled as he murmured to himself, "Little sister, just watch and see how your big brother takes on the Daolord Cloudworld."

He strolled forward in a relaxed manner, and with each step he took a fiery divine crow would manifest beneath his feet. The line between reality and illusions was blurred around him. Clearly, he was training even when he was just walking. He was an incredibly famous figure in the Twelve Palaces, not because he had accomplished any special feats, simply because he was a member of the Palace of the Heart! Although the Heart Palace had pitifully few members, every single member was frighteningly strong.

Bertulu focused on the Dao of Light, using heartforce as a support skill. Heartlord Solewind, however, had truly focused all of his efforts on his skills as a Heartforce Cultivator. His accomplishments in this area vastly outstripped Bertulu's, who had only reached the utter apex of power at the World level in the Dao of Light.

.....

"The almighty Hegemon personally gave me pointers in the past. As for this opportunity he is offering... I, Greatjoy, shall definitely grasp it." This was a youth who was dressed in strange black imperial robes and who

wore a crown on his head. He was the most powerful World-level expert in the Palace of Spacetime, and he referred to himself as Prince Greatjoy. Although on the surface he was rather calm and stately when interacting with others, he was actually an extremely wild, berserk man.

“The Daolord Cloudworld, eh? Hmph.” Prince Greatjoy flew out of the Spacetime Palace and headed straight towards the Daolord Cloudworld.

.....

More than half of the World-level experts immediately flew towards their Daolord Cloudworld as soon as they received the news. Every single one of the Twelve Palaces had their own Daolord Cloudworld, and the difficulty level in each was identical.

Swoosh!

Ning descended into the Armaments Gorge of the Sword Palace.

“Darknorth.” The two guardians of the gorge, Swordfive and Swordsix, both looked at Ning.

“Swordfive. Swordsix.” Ning said in a rather humble manner, “I’ve been acknowledged by the Sword Pagodas. I believe I now have the chance to choose a single treasure from the Armaments Gorge, so long as it doesn’t cost more than a million cubes of chaos nectar. Right?”

“Right.” Swordfive nodded. “The Sword Palace has always been very generous towards World-level cultivators who are acknowledged by the Sword Pagodas.”

“Swordfive, can you follow me inside?” Ning asked.

“I can.” Swordfive nodded. He surmised that Ning probably wanted to carry out a major business transaction. There was no other reason for Ning to ask him to go in.

The Armaments Gorge was filled with countless treasures, but Ning went straight towards one of the corners in the far back.

There was a seemingly ordinary black bottle placed atop one of the tables in the back. This black bottle, however, was priced at 1.5 million

cubes of chaos nectar! This bottle was a magic treasure known as the 'Godwater Flagon of the Seven Flags', and it contained seven different types of Dao water. These seven types of Dao water could be used to form an enormous formation known as the Seven Flags Formation which could easily annihilate almost any opponent.

"Can I take this flagon?" Ning asked.

Swordfive slowly shook his head. "You aren't permitted to choose anything worth more than a million cubes. If you insist on choosing this item, you have to pay an extra five hundred thousand cubes."

"Done." Ning nodded.

There were quite a few treasures in the Armaments Gorge which involved Dao water, and most of them were treasures which were forged out of Dao water. The Godwater Flagon of the Seven Flags was the most suitable choice for Ning.

"Need anything else?" Swordfive had heard that Ning had sold off a Bloodfire Cloudfruit for 1.8 million cubes.

"I need some Dao lightning as well." Ning grinned.

.....

Ning departed from the Armaments Gorge, then transformed into a streak of light that flew back towards his own Immortal estate.

"Master." Su Youji and World God Pillsaint both came out to greet him.

"No one is allowed to disturb me. No matter who comes, they are not permitted to see me." Ning gave them some instructions, then went into his private room.

Ning sat down in the lotus position within this private room, then placed a black bottle, an azure cauldron, and a grey gourd next to him.

This time, he had purchased seven types of Dao water and five types of Dao lightning. He had paid 2.1 million cubes of chaos nectar for them! Factoring in the million cubes of credit which the Sword Palace had bestowed upon him, he actually had used up more than three million

cubes!

“With these items, I should now be able to make myself much more powerful.” Ning was quite calm as he summoned the technique for creating the [Novessence Thunder] and the [Novessence Water] into his mind.

# Chapter 18: Training

Ji Ning willed the ethereal lightning to fly out of the gray gourd. It seemed unremarkable, but in reality it was terrifyingly powerful. Under Ning's control, it swirled around Ning's body and then seeped into it. For someone with a weaker divine body, such an act was akin to suicide. It must be understood that this was Dao lightning! Someone with a weak body would have it instantly reduced to ashes.

Long ago, when Ning was still an Empyrean God, his body was incapable of enduring the power of the Ninehorn Lightning Serpents. In order to tame and control one of them, Ning had to first use Elder-level lightning serpents to repeatedly enter his body and completely transform it into a lightning-attribute body. Ning died multiple times before being able to successfully complete the transformation process. Only then was he able to survive alongside the Ninehorn Lightning Serpent and draw it into his body, storing it in the divine rune of a lightning serpent egg.

And now?

Ning had completely mastered the [Golden Idol], making his divine body comparable to top-grade Dao treasures! This Dao lightning was completely incapable of harming Ning.

Whoosh.

After the ethereal lightning entered Ning's body, it seemed to be affected by a powerful gravitational force. With a swoosh, it was drawn towards Ning's Jindan chaosworld, towards the location where one of nine lightning essences was located. This lightning essence was similarly ethereal, and the two seemed to have come from the same source. The Dao lightning voluntarily merged into the lightning essence, rapidly surging into it and drawing upon the Chaos lightning energy which had previously been present.

"I've finished absorbing the first Dao lightning." Ning nodded slowly.

The reason why Daolord Allgod had separated the [Novessence Thunder] into the upper part and the lower part, despite the fact that he

created the technique as a Daolord who didn't need Chaos lightning, was because he needed to establish the nine lightning essence foundations. The lightning foundations were similar to the 'lightning serpent egg' which Ning once used to store and transform the Ninehorn Lightning Serpent. The lightning foundations were the places where the lightning would stay and 'live'. This was their home!

The lightning foundations which Daolord Allgod had created were countless times more profound than the 'lightning serpent egg'. They were tremendously attractive towards Dao lightning, and Dao lightning naturally 'liked' to live within them.

"Next." Ning willed the next one to enter.

Four streams of Dao lightning instantly began to surge out from the four handles on the azure cauldron in front of Ning. Under Ning's control, the four streams of lightning surged into his body. These four streams of Dao lightning were similarly drawn into four different lightning essence foundations and were quickly swallowed up. They now had their own foundations where they belonged.

"And the Elementum Waterflame Gourd." Finally, Ning produced the gourd which he had been using for quite some time. He used the exact same technique to draw those two streams of Dao lightning into the foundations inside his body.

There were a total of nine lightning essence foundations! These nine foundations were meant to hold nine streaks of Dao lightning or nine streaks of Chaos lightning which belonged to the same 'type'. Right now, Ning had seven of those streaks of Dao lightning! These seven Dao lightnings were the seven cheapest ones he could find, but they had still cost Ning a total of 2.1 million cubes of chaos nectar! As for the seven types of Dao water, they had cost Ning a total of 1.5 million cubes of chaos nectar.

The Dao lightning was more powerful and thus preferred by cultivators, resulting in a slightly higher price than the Dao water.

Ning had purchased nine types of Chaos water shortly after arriving at

the Sword Palace. As a result, his body already had nine types of water essence foundations within it, and he used them to absorb those streams of Dao water, completely drawing them inside.

“The transfer is complete.” Ning was a bit excited. “I wonder if I’ll be able to start training in the lower part now.”

To actually absorb the Dao lightning didn’t really signify anything, as Ning could control them regardless of whether they were inside his body or inside a magic treasure! In this sense, the location didn’t matter.

“According to the notes regarding the lower part of the [Novessence Thunder], only a Samsara Daolord can train in the technique because Dao lightning is thousands of times more explosive and unruly than Chaos lightning. The Immortal energy of World-level cultivators simply cannot cope with it, preventing them from training in this technique.” Ning’s eyes were shining. When he had first started on the [Novessence Thunder] using Chaos lightning, he had failed numerous types in his attempts to master it. In the end, he had to rely on his azureflower mist energy to succeed.

Using the azureflower mist energy to control the Chaos lightning had been hundreds of times easier than using his own Immortal energy.

“The reason why only Daolords can train in the lower part is because the Immortal energy of World-level cultivators is too weak. However, I can use the azureflower mist energy instead. That energy should be comparable to the energy of a Daolord of the First Step’s. According to the manual, a Daolord of the First Step has a chance to complete the second stage of the technique. In fact, he even has a shot at the third stage!” Ning felt quite eager.

The second stage referred to the secret art needed to completely merge two of the streaks of Dao lightning together. This would instantly cause the power of the Dao lightning to skyrocket!

Upon reaching the second stage, those two streaks of Dao lightning would probably be even more powerful than seven streaks of Dao lightning and seven streams of Dao water combined! Right now, Ning was

relying on superior numbers in order to achieve victory. And yet, all his Dao lightning and Dao water combined was merely on par with the second stage.

“If I can master at least the second stage for the Dao lightning, then do the same for the Dao water, then use them along with the rest of my lightning and water... the power should be quite extraordinary.” Ning was filled with eagerness.

“Time to begin.” Using the azureflower mist energy to reinforce his physical strength in battle was the most basic way of using it. Using it to train in secret arts? That was far more impressive! This was a form of energy comparable to a Daolord’s energy, after all!

Whoosh! Whoosh!

The azureflower mist energy spread out in accordance with the [Novessence Thunder], stretching out like an invisible hand that quickly latched onto the Watersmoke Lightning and the Firecloud Lightning. These were the two types of Dao lightning that were the easiest to control.

“Hahaha... I’m completely able to control them! My suspicions were correct! My azureflower mist energy can be used to control Dao lightning as if it was Daolord energy.” Ning began to grow excited. This meant that he would be able to realize his ambitions! The two streaks of Dao lightning were innately explosive, but the power of the azureflower mist energy was still able to control them.

They followed Ning’s will and began to transform nonstop as the secret art began to take shape.

However, the later parts of this process grew increasingly complicated. The [Novessence Thunder] and the [Novessence Water] techniques were techniques that were akin to applying alchemy and pill-forging principles to lightning and water. The lightning would be constantly adjusted and harmonized, causing its power to eventually be completely transformed in nature! Pill-makers needed to have complete control over their pills, and Ning needed to have similarly exquisite control over his lightning.

The process grew more and more difficult.

BOOM!

It had been just the slightest slip-up, but the entire secret art broke apart and the two streaks of Dao lightning instantly split apart, each returning to its own lightning essence foundation.

“My azureflower mist energy is clearly far more powerful than the Immortal energy of a World-level cultivator. I trust that it is no weaker than a Daolord’s, and my soul is also comparable to a Daolord’s soul. I refuse to believe I can’t do this!” Ning tried again.

Once.

Twice.

Thrice...

Ning tried twenty times in a row, only to fail each time.

Ning was stunned.

“Let me try the Dao water. Maybe I’ll be able to succeed with the Dao water.” Ning once more gave it a try, this time using the Dao water. It was clearly much easier to control Dao water than Dao lightning, as water was less explosive and wild, but as the process went on it failed once more at the very end. Multiple, repeated failures resulted in Ning giving up.

“Why do I keep failing?” Ning carefully went through his memories regarding these two techniques.

These two techniques...

The [Novessence Thunder] and the [Novessence Water] were created based on Daolord Allgod’s insights into the process of alchemy and artificing. The process allowed him to take exquisite control over lightning and water, using them to form tremendously powerful secret arts. After one became a Daolord of the Fourth Step, it would be possible for one to master the ninth stage and complete the process. Daolords of the First Step generally could master the second stage, and they even had a chance at mastering the third stage.

“Why can’t I even master the second stage? Controlling them feels

incredibly taxing.”

Ning suddenly stared blankly.

“I understand! Daolord Allgod was a Verge-level Daolord when he mastered the ninth stage for the lightning and water... but who was he? He was a master of alchemy and artificing, a true grandmaster of countless Daos. He was incredibly skilled in this respect! I, however, know nothing about alchemy or artificing whatsoever. I’m completely relying on the strength of the azureflower mist energy to brute-force the lightning and water into cooperating. It only makes sense that this sort of brute-force method will result in repeated failures.” Ning finally understood.

Alchemy and artificing were not simple tasks. They were arts that required tremendous levels of skill and expertise. World God Pillsaint was an incredibly skilled grandmaster in alchemy, but how many other World-level cultivators were similarly talented in this regard? Alchemy truly was an art filled with countless mysteries, but Ning knew nothing of it at all. All he could do was rely on his azureflower mist energy to brute-force things...

“Ugh...” Ning shook his head.

If he could master the second stage for the lightning and the water, then when he used them as well as his other types of Dao lightning and Dao water in a formation to attack an opponent, he would probably be able to slay an ordinary Daolord of the First Step in one blow! Even if that person didn’t die, he would be heavily injured. A few successive blows would ensure that the Daolord would definitely perish.

This was why the azureflower mist energy was so incredible and special. It gave World-level cultivators a chance to master techniques they simply shouldn’t be able to... but alas, Ning didn’t understand enough about alchemy or artificing.

“Too late to start training in these areas now. There’s no time. I have to try out the Daolord Cloudworld soon,” Ning mused. “But I just so happen to have an expert alchemist by my side. After the challenge is completed, I’ll ask Pillsaint for some advice! If I learn some basic alchemy skills, I’ll

probably be able to rely on the experience I gained to make some progress in mastering the second stage of these two techniques."

# Chapter 19: Challenging the Daolord Cloudworld

Ji Ning tested out using the seven types of Dao water and Dao lightning in the privacy of his study, using them to form a Heptastar Duality Formation. Cultivators would often use lightning and water in joint formations. The treasures which Ning had purchased previously all had formations built into them, such as the Godwater Flagon of the Seven Flags which held a Seven Flags Formation.

After familiarizing himself with the formation, Ning calmed himself down and started to think back to the insights regarding the sword which he had gained in recent years. Slowly, his heart grew peaceful, calm, and empty.

A full day passed in the blink of an eye.

Ning opened his eyes, a hint of eagerness in them. “Time to try out the Daolord Cloudworld.”

Ning left the study, then glanced at World God Pillsaint and Flamefairy Su Youji. The two were seated outside, drinking some wine, but when they saw Ning they immediately rose to their feet. Su Youji immediately said, “Master, are you going to the Daolord Cloudworld?”

“Yes.” Ning nodded.

“Master.” Pillsaint hurriedly said, “I’ve heard that quite a few of the acknowledged World-level cultivators of the Twelve Palaces went to the Daolord Cloudworld on the very first day. It seems the competition will be quite fierce... but I know that you will definitely succeed.”

“You both know about it?” Ning was surprised. It seemed as though everyone knew about the Daolord Cloudworld trials.

“Although you didn’t tell us about it, even an idiot would be able to figure it out. The Twelve Palaces don’t exactly have that many acknowledged World-level cultivators! For so many of them to enter the Daolord Cloudworld on the exact same day is far too bizarre.” World God

Pillsaint looked towards Ning. “As I see it... you’ll definitely succeed, Master. In fact, you might be number one. Those other fellows are nothing more than ‘dirt chickens and clay dogs’, of no worth whatsoever.”

Pillsaint was such an adorable-looking figure that these words didn’t seem offensive at all. Instead, he made them sound amusing.

“I hope you are right.” Ning laughed. “Alright, time for me to go to the Daolord Cloudworld.”

Su Youji and Pillsaint watched as Ning flew into the air towards the distant Daolord Cloudworld.

The Daolord Cloudworld was the tallest building in the entire Palace of the Sword, and its outer surface was that of four enormous layers of clouds.

“I’ll do everything I can. Let’s see how far I’ll be able to make it.” Ning craned his neck, staring upwards at the Daolord Cloudworld. Even though he had tried it out several times in recent years, those had all been merely for the sake of testing out some new sword-arts. He had never really gone all out.

Whoosh.

Ning took a single step forwards, moving deep into the layer of black mist and inside the Daolord Cloudworld.

“Swordlord Darknorth just went in.”

“Now, all of our qualified Swordlords have entered.”

“I wonder what’s going on? All of the geniuses of the Twelve Palaces have gone inside recently.” The black-armored Daolords patrolling off in the distance were all watching. News spread quite quickly within the Twelve Palaces.

The Daolord Cloudworld was split up into four levels. These levels were known as the Blackcloud World, the Azurecloud World, the Silvercloud World, and the Goldcloud World.

Cultivators of the Sword Palace would have to start from the Blackcloud

World each time, because the main point of the Daolord Cloudworld was to help cultivators find suitable opponents.

.....

The Azurecloud World. The white-robed Ji Ning was striding atop a long path formed from azure clouds, wielding a longsword in one hand. Right in front of him was a golem barring a path. The golem was shaped like a strange beast with four legs and was roughly as strong as a Daolord of the First Step.

Boom.

Sword-light swept against the golem's chest in a seemingly casual manner, but the golem was knocked flying backwards off its feet. This was Ning's 'Heavenbreaker stance' of the [Brightmoon] sword-art.

Swish.

Sword-light flashed again in a mysterious manner, causing many sword-shadows to appear in the air. There was no way to tell which attack was real and which attack was illusory. The edge of the sword sheared against the neck of a spider-shaped golem, and it couldn't help but crumple as it was sent flying backwards by Ning's sword-light.

Ning defeated opponent after opponent on the azure cloud path, but the more he defeated the stronger the new opponents became. In fact, even the total number of opponents began to increase as well. Ning, however, continued to merely use a single sword, and the only sword-art he used was his own [Brightmoon] sword-art.

"I've never finished going through the entire second level before." Ning's sword-arts had truly reached a profound level.

Each of the five stances of [Brightmoon] were actually stronger than the seventh stances of the [Heartsword] or the [Heartseal] sword-arts.

"It seems that at my current level of sword-arts, a single sword is enough to easily overcome this level." Ning was already able to see the distant end to this azure cloud path. He had distilled some of the essence of [Heartseal] and [Heartsword] sword-arts, then raised them to a higher

level. When he used his own sword-arts, they carried an aura of cyclical reincarnation as well, making the five stances of [Brightmoon] naturally become illusory.

Slash!

A dazzling streak of sword-light split the air.

Ning's sword was like a comet that sped through the skies. It was the most beautiful thing in this world, and it seemed almost dreamlike. Ning's sword had reached an incredible level of speed! With a slash, it cut deep into the body of a golem. Generally speaking, most people would stay far away from golems and fight them from a distance, but this was the final opponent which Ning had to deal with.

Swish! The sword-light stabbed through the golem's throat.

"Eh?" Ning was rather surprised. "It went through? I usually wasn't able to cut or pierce through the other golems."

Whoosh. The stabbed golem quickly retreated backwards, and a strange liquid began to flow out of its throat. The wound quickly disappeared, and the golem left the azure cloud path.

"I've finally reached the end of the path." Ning flew out of the azure cloud path. In front of him was a small island that was only a few square kilometers in size, and there was a suit of azure armor placed on the island.

Ning chuckled when he saw the suit of azure armor.

"Azure armor? It seems as though it is time for me to upgrade my outfit."

The first time one passed the Blackcloud World, a suit of black armor would be awarded. The first time a person overcame the Azurecloud World, a suit of azure cloud would be awarded. Ning had acquired his black armor long ago, which was a top-grade Dao armor. It wasn't even as useful as the aquaflect armor he had purchased during the treasure auction. The azure armor, however, was an Eternal-level treasure.

“C’mere.” Ning stepped forward and accepted the azure armor, then sat down in the lotus position and began to slowly bind it while mentally preparing himself for the third level, the Silvercloud World.

### The Silvercloud World...

World-level cultivators had absolutely no chance of making it to the end of this level! To make it past this level meant that you had reached the threshold of power of a Daolord of the Third Step. This was completely impossible. Even if Ning reached the third stage in the [Novessence Thunder] and [Novessence Water] and was thus able to slay a Daolord of the First Step, he would merely be equivalent to a fairly formidable Daolord of the Second Step. There was no way he’d be able to overcome the Silvercloud World.

Bertulu... Eastcult... none of them, not even the most talented of geniuses, could accomplish this task!

However, more than 90% of the geniuses acknowledged by the ancient pagodas were able to reach the threshold of Daolords of the Second Step. Ning, for example, was already equivalent to a Daolord of the First Step with his azureflower mist energy alone. Given that his sword-arts were even more profound than the Reincarnation stance and the Cosmic Heart stance, his skill in this area was actually somewhat higher than that of many actual Daolords of the Second Step! This was why he had been able to make it through the Azurecloud World with just as ingle sword.

“The azure armor is a low-grade Eternal treasure. It has no special properties other than its ability to absorb some degree of energy.” Ning couldn’t help but shake his head. At least his aquaflect armor was able to reflect damage. “Still, the more powerful my future opponents are, the less useful my current armor will be. As for my opponents on the Silvercloud World, they will all be at least at the threshold of the Daolord of the Second Step level.”

Ning switched armors, but he still elected to make it look like a set of white clothes.

Ning then sat down in the lotus position again and began to breathe

quietly as he started to work on replenishing the azurelower mist energy he had used up during the first two levels. At the same time, he also thought back to some of the mistakes he had made in his earlier battle. This was the first time in the hundred years he been trying out in the Cloudworld that he had made it all the way through the second level. He had gained quite a few insights from this.

He thought back to the previous battles he had fought as he pondered on his sword-arts.

“On the final day, I will test myself against the Silvercloud World.” Ning came to a decision.

Ning was actually one of the slowest ones, as most of the World-level cultivators acknowledged by the ancient pagodas had already finished.

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The imperial palace. The thirteen thrones levitating within the void of space.

“Ahaha, Heartforce Cultivators truly are impressive. Solewind’s heartforce is becoming more and more frightening.” Daolord Yinwind laughed merrily. “Our Saber Palace won’t say a single begrudging word if he is ranked number one.”

At present, aside from Heartlord Solewind of the Heartforce Palace being ranked as number one, the rest of the top four had been completely dominated by the Palace of the Saber!

“Hmph.” The nearby Lord Woodflower just let out a cold snort.

The Sword Palace and the Saber Palace had always been somewhat at loggerheads, because the Dao of the Sword and the Dao of the Saber had always been the two most offensive, combative Daos in the Endless Territories. Generally speaking, more cultivators trained in the Dao of the Sword! Slightly fewer trained in the Dao of the Saber.

“Woodflower.” Daolord Yinwind glanced sideways at Lord Woodflower, then let out an odd chuckle. “Five members of your Sword Palace have already finished their attempts, yes? The highest ranking member is

merely ranked seventh. You have no chance at all.”

“Hmph.” Lord Woodflower had an ugly look on his face. He did not, however, try to argue. The Saber Palace’s performance truly had been dominating, while the Sword Palace’s performance truly had been lackluster.

These Palace Lords and Vice Palace Lords had all reached the end of the line. If they succeeded in their Daomerge, they would gain eternity. If they failed, they would die and their Dao would vanish. At their level, face mattered more than almost anything else.

“We’ll see about that,” Lord Woodflower said flatly.

# Chapter 20: The Altar

Time passed quickly, and the final day of the three days the almighty Hegemon had allotted the challengers had arrived. Ji Ning and quite a few others had spent the previous day recuperating in the Azurecloud World, so as to be in peak condition when they challenged the Silvercloud World. Only a few people like Ning were able to fight for so long, after all; the majority relied on highly exhausting divine abilities that could allow them to unleash obliterating levels of power for brief moments.

On the third day, all of the remaining geniuses of the Twelve Palaces began to challenge the Silvercloud World.

“Greatjoy has come out.”

“That’s Greatjoy.”

Every person seated on the thirteen thrones, the almighty Hegemon included, was staring at one particular scene. This was the image displaying Prince Greatjoy challenging the Silvercloud World.

“So fast.”

“He’s blowing through them like rotted wood.”

“Hegemon, I feel upset each time I see Greatjoy. I really feel regretful that I wasn’t able to recruit him into our Skymetal Palace.” A handsome youth dressed in beautiful golden robes let out a sigh. “I could tell all those years ago that he had excellent potential, even though he was very weak starting off. In the end, the Spacetime Palace managed to lure him in... and then he somehow became one of your honorary disciples, Hegemon! Judging from how he is blasting through the Silvercloud World, he’s clearly become much more powerful once again.”

“Ahaha, Severtrip, jealousy won’t get you anything. Greatjoy is now a member of our Spacetime Palace.” A jade-eyed man with tousled hair let out a loud laugh.

“It is true that Greatjoy has improved quite rapidly.” The almighty Hegemon stroked his pristine white beard.

The almighty Hegemon's accomplishments in the Dao of Spacetime allowed him to look down upon all others in the Endless Territories. In the Twelve Palaces, he was particularly close to the Spacetime Palace, and some of its dazzling geniuses would be given a chance to earn one of his legacies and become an honorary disciples! Prince Greatjoy was one of them.

The Hegemon and the twelve golden-armored lords continued to stare at the many scenes playing out in midair. Prince Greatjoy was moving farther and farther up the stairs to the altar, defeating one golem after another along the way.

Rumble...

Prince Greatjoy's body shone with golden light as he manifested six arms and began to sweep forward with even greater power.

His palm-arts, fist-arts, finger-arts... they were all unfathomably profound and ridiculously powerful. Sometimes he moved quickly, sometimes he moved slowly, but the region of spacetime surrounding him was in a perpetual state of flux. It was extremely difficult for the golems attacking him to unleash their true power, but every single strike of Prince Greatjoy's contained tremendous might.

Boom! Boom! Boom!

He devastated his way through the golems, his entire body have transformed into a golden color. He looked like a golden god of war, but a look of absolute, glacial calm was in his eyes.

“He’s already reached six hundred!” Daolord Thousand Waves let out a startled cry. “Given how he’s cruised his way to the six hundredth level, he might have a shot at giving Solewind a run for his money.”

The Silvercloud World was actually one enormous altar that had nine hundred levels that served as the ‘steps’ to the top of the altar. The farther up you went, the more powerful your foes would be. The distance you were able to travel was a testament to your strength!

Right now, Heartlord Solewind was ranked number one. He had made it

to the 692nd step.

Ranked in second place was Saberlord Redsnow of the Saber Palace. He had made it to the 680th step.

Ranked third and fourth were members of the Saber Palace who had made it past the 600th step as well.

600 steps... this represented a certain level of power. Most of the acknowledged cultivators had already completed their attempts, but only eight had made it past the 600th step!

“Given how easy it was for him to make it past the six hundredth level, he does indeed have a shot at matching Solewind.” Lord Woodflower nodded slowly as he gave his appraisal.

“Hard to say. He makes it look easy, but he might’ve already unleashed his full power,” the nearby Daolord Yinwind retorted coldly.

“Just keep watching.” Lord Woodflower glanced sideways at him.

“Hmph.” Daolord Yinwind stared hard at the scene playing out before him. Prince Greatjoy was still steadily advancing. Starting from the six hundredth level, the golems became much more powerful and and much more numerous. In fact, there could be as many as twenty or thirty of them attacking you at the same time. However, Prince Greatjoy’s mastery over spacetime allowed him to tower over almost all World-level cultivators of the Twelve Palaces. He was able find unconceivable openings and positions, allowing him to never have to face more than three golems at one time.

Boom! Boom! Boom!

“Six hundred fifty.”

“Six hundred sixty. Six hundred seventy.”

Daolord Yinwind’s face grew uglier and uglier to behold, because Prince Greatjoy had just caused a member of the Saber Palace to be eliminated from this competition.

“Six hundred eighty! He’s still advancing.”

“Six hundred ninety!”

Prince Greatjoy’s face was starting to turn solemn, but a look of madness was in his eyes. His entire body radiated that blinding golden light, and each of his attacks contained utterly earth-shaking power. The golems were able to land an occasional attack against him, but were completely unable to harm him.

“He must have reached at least the eighth stage in the [Illusory Jade] secret art.” The youth dressed in the beautiful golden robes, Daolord Severtrip, let out a sigh when he saw this. “This secret art isn’t all that profound, but he still was able to reach the level of near-perfection in it. This is a secret art of our Dao of Metal... he really should’ve entered our Skymetal Palace.”

“He beat him.”

“He moved past Solewind.”

The farther one advanced, the more difficult each level became. Prince Greatjoy’s face was extremely solemn now. He was finding it extremely difficult to advance, with the golems doing everything they could to oppose him!

“Six hundred ninety-nine... seven hundred! He made it to level seven hundred.”

“Previously, the only members of the Twelve Palaces who made it past level seven hundred at the World level were Bertulu and Eastcult. Now, Greatjoy has joined their ranks.”

The ancient powers sighed in amazement as they saw this.

As for Prince Greatjoy, he gritted his teeth and fought like a madman. By nature, he wasn’t the type of person to easily admit defeat, and he still stubbornly fought and clawed his way forwards. He had reached exceedingly great heights in both the Dao of Spacetime and the Dao of Metal, and had also received personal guidance from the almighty Hegemon himself. Now, faced with such tremendous pressure, he actually began to slowly grow stronger and stronger.

Rumble...

Alas, with each step he took the golems became increasingly terrifying as well, and even more of them were appearing.

Boom! Boom! BOOM!

One missed strike and he was almost instantly knocked flying. Moments later, ropes tightened around him.

Defeat!

He had been defeated at the 719th step!

The ancient powers seated within the thirteen thrones couldn't help but sigh in amazement. When they met and spoke with the most talented geniuses like Prince Greatjoy, they virtually treated those geniuses as equals, because once these geniuses made their breakthroughs they would quickly become comparable to Daolords of the Third Step. Once they engaged in a bit of training, they would quickly be able to compare to Daolords of the Fourth Step. It would be very easy for them to become major figures within the Endless Territories.

Right now, Prince Greatjoy was ranked number one after having made it to the 719th level.

Heartlord Solewind was ranked second after having made it to the 692nd level.

Ranked third was Saberlord Redsnow, level 680.

Number four was Saberlord Grief, level 668.

.....

The Azurecloud World of the Daolord Cloudworld.

Ji Ning rose to his feet and walked directly towards the highest position on the island he was in. When he reached it, a spacetime vortex formed around him. Ning disappeared from the Azurecloud World.

Within the Silvercloud World.

This was a world shaped like an utterly enormous altar that had nine

hundred steps to it.

“What an enormous altar.” Ning craned his neck as he stared upwards, seeing the many golems roving about. He could also hear faint booms ringing out from far ahead. “There are other cultivators here right now as well? I wonder which member of the Sword Palace is here... or perhaps it is one of the other Swordlords?”

There were so many golems within the altar that ten cultivators could challenge this world at the same time.

“Time to go.”

Ning held a pair of Eternal swords in his hands as he advanced forwards.

“GWAAAAR!” Instantly, a pitch-black golem shaped like a three-headed, four-legged beast let out a roar as it pounced towards Ning like a streak of light, moving roughly three times as fast as the speed of light! This single level was roughly as long as the entire Azurecloud World had been, but it was merely a million kilometers wide. A million kilometers might seem like a long distance, but major powers were able to traverse it with just a single step.

“Hmph.” Ning looked at the golem.

Boom! Instantly, Ning’s body radiated with lightning, water, and many other types of light. Some were dazzling, some were ruinous, some were subdued. The seven types of Dao lightning all had different auras, as did the same types of Dao water. Still, Ning was able to fully control all of them, and with but a thought Ning caused them to join together into a Heptastar Duality Formation. An enormous, dazzling, bizarre formation appeared in the air which completely covered the four-legged beast which was charging towards Ning.

Boom! Although the beast-golem let out a furious howl, it was still forced several steps backwards.

Ning was able to advance to the second level with ease. As he continued his advance, the golems became increasingly powerful. In fact, there were even a few golems that attacked from afar using magic treasures, and the

effectiveness of Ning's Hepastar Duality Formation began to lessen. Ning had to unleash his sword-arts to fight as well.

Boom! Boom! Boom!

Ning's sword-arts were quite mighty, allowing him to sweep through all obstacles.

Two hundred steps. Three hundred steps.

"Eh?" Ning's ears suddenly pricked up. "It seems everything went silent."

There had been another cultivator fighting on the other side of the altar. Moments ago, explosions had been ringing out unabated. Now, nothing could be heard at all.

"Woodflower, your Swordlord Wildfire has been defeated as well. He lost on the 597th step. He almost made it to the 600th!" Daolord Yinwind glanced sideways at Daolord Woodflower. "Right now, the only remaining member in your Sword Palace is that kid who just became a Swordlord a short while ago."

Daolord Woodflower ignored Daolord Yinwind's mockery. Instead, he stared at the scene of Ji Ning forging his way ahead.

Right now, Ji Ning was the only member of the Sword Palace who was still taking part in the challenge. All the others had already failed.

# Chapter 21: Tenacity

Within the Sword Palace's Silvercloud World.

The rest of the altar was now completely silent. Still, Ning merely made a note of it as he then continued to fight all-out against the golems on each level of the altar.

Rumble...

Boom!

Explosions rang out unabated.

His Dao water and Dao lightning were combined into a formation of tremendous power, but at this point they were having a limited amount of impact on the increasingly powerful golems. Still, for someone at Ning's level, even a limited impact would make things much simpler.

Level four hundred!

Level five hundred!

Ning continued to advance. His most powerful technique was the [Brightmoon] sword-art, and it was guaranteed that in the long run it would always be his most powerful technique! Once he became a Daolord, he would have his own path and that path would always allow him to unleash the most power possible. By then, the other sword-arts would merely provide him with guidance and experience, helping him enhance his understanding of the Dao of the Sword. However, his greatest power would forever lie within the [Brightmoon] sword-art.

The same was true for other experts of the Dao of the Sword. Their strongest sword-arts would be the ones they created!

"Break!"

Heavenbreaker stance. Shadowless stance. Soleheart stance. Yin-Yang stance. Blood Drop stance.

The five stances of [Brightmoon]! And Ning had now infused them with the sword-intent of reincarnation, making his five stances into a

continuous cycle that flowed with no weaknesses or flaws whatsoever, allowing him to unleash even more power in battle.

Of the five [Brightmoon] stances, Ning's strongest stances were the Yin-Yang stance and the Soleheart stance. These two were both defensive techniques. Ning had put a tremendous amount of effort into his Unicorn's Domain, making him somewhat stronger in the area of defense.

"Hey, Woodflower. That's the kid who just became a Swordlord in your palace, right? He actually made it to the 500th level." Daolord Severtrip suddenly called out in surprise.

"Mmhmm." Lord Woodflower nodded, revealing a smile as he watched Ning advance nonstop.

"It is pretty impressive for him to have even made it past five hundred. It seems this 'Darknorth' kid has some talent. A pity that he entered the Sword Palace a bit too late," Daolord Yinwind said, attempting to pour some cold water on their excitement.

Daolord Woodflower didn't argue. Even he could tell that although Ning's sword-arts were profound, they also had noticeable flaws compared to the skills of Prince Greatjoy or Saberlord Redsnow! Ji Ning's sword-arts were average amongst the Swordlords who had been acknowledged by the ancient pagodas. It must be understood that he had only been acknowledged a mere century ago. For him to be considered 'average' amongst the sixty-seven most talented World-level cultivators in the kingdom was already quite impressive.

The 500th level was a fairly 'average' level. Many geniuses were unable to make it much farther past this level.

Ning had three heads and six arms, and he wielded a Violetjewel in each of his six arms as he fought with all his might. Lightning and torrents of water exploded through the air unabated, doing their best to slow down and affect the impending golems.

Whooooosh.

A golem suddenly transformed into an enormous wave of water that

came crashing down towards Ning. Ning hurriedly used his Dao lightning and Dao water to defend, but they were quickly submerged within the enormous wave, and it continued its crashing assault.

“Yin-Yang stance.” Ning’s six swords simultaneously struck out. This was a stance meant to deal with group attacks. Ning was often forced to use the Yin-Yang stance in the Silvercloud World, because the golems would often attack in groups.

Whoooosh. Yin and Yang spun as Ning’s sword-light flew. The surrounding area seemed to have been transformed into a black hole which completely blocked all the waters of the wave.

“Kill!” After pushing through the wave, Ning continued to advance.

Five hundred fifty. Five hundred sixty. Five hundred seventy...

Ning was incredibly tenacious and durable. There was no way for him to use any divine abilities with his azureflower mist energy, but because of how steady he was he was able to stay at maximum power for a very long period of time. Other Daolord-equivalents, even ones like Prince Greatjoy, had to conserve their divine power and thus would often engage in normal combat while only occasionally exploding forth with their full power. Thus, they even brought spirit-pills, chaos jewels, and chaos nectar to replenish their depleting energy.

Ning, however, was simply too stable!

His sword-arts were similarly stable. The five stances of [Brightmoon] included all aspects of swordplay. Some swordsmen were skilled in one area and weaker in other areas; in short, they had their areas of specialties and their deficiencies. Ning, however, was skilled in every single area. He was slightly stronger in defense, but that was just in comparison. The Reincarnation sword-intent filling his sword-arts made it so that all five stances were merged together perfectly. This naturally made him even stabler.

Emperor Mirrorsnow was legendary for his tenacity. Even those who were stronger than him would find it difficult to defeat him.

“Advance!

“Over the course of countless years, numerous major powers have perished. None of those Daolords who had failed their Daomerge have been able to come back to life! An enormous price must be paid in order to bring back someone whose truesoul has already been extinguished. If I’m not strong enough, I won’t be able to beseech the almighty Hegemon and experts on his level to help me. I won’t be able to convince them that the price will be worth it.

“If I want to accomplish my goals, I have to seize every opportunity I can.”

Ning would never give up. He knew that many members of even the Brightshore Imperials had perished over the course of years, with none being brought back to life. Clearly, even if the almighty Hegemon was capable of resurrecting the dead the price would be so terrifying that he wouldn’t be willing to do it lightly.

“I’ve just started. I can’t give up so soon.” Ning’s sword-arts were slowly, subtly improving during this process. He wasn’t at a bottleneck, after all, and this sort of furious, high-pressure combat would naturally result in his sword-arts being perfected nonstop.

“Keep going. I can take at least another step forwards.” Ning could feel that the pressure was growing greater and greater.

“Eh? Is he actually...”

“Is that kid from the Sword Palace actually...”

The ancient powers seated on the thirteen thrones all stared curiously at this scene. Ning was currently battling against six golems, and it was difficult for him to advance. Every single one of the six golems possessed tremendous levels of power, and by now Ning’s Dao lightning and Dao water were of very little help to him.

“Six hundred. He actually made it to level six hundred.”

“His sword-arts actually enabled him to make it to level six hundred?”

The ancient powers were all shocked. Daolord Thousand Waves cried out in surprise, “His sword-arts are clearly quite ordinary compared to the other acknowledged World-level geniuses, but he actually managed to make it to the six hundredth level! Ji Ning already ranks in the top ten.”

As time passed, the total number who made it past level six hundred continued to grow.

On the very first day, only five had made it past that level.

By the time Prince Greatjoy made it past, more than eight had already reached this level.

And now, Ji Ning was the tenth.

It must be understood that this contest was a contest involving all the World-level geniuses of the Twelve Palaces. For Ning to be only the tenth to make it through this level meant that he was one of the elites within his group. In fact, his performance was better than that of any other member of the Sword Palace.

“Six hundred and two. Mm, that should be it.” The white-bearded Hegemon nodded slowly. “Don’t underestimate this Darknorth kid. His sword-arts might seem to be inferior to that of Greatjoy and the others, making him look ordinary, but they are extremely balanced. He’s skilled in every single aspect, and from what I understand he has gained the legacy of Mirrorsnow. Look, you can see the sword-intent of Reincarnation permeating through his sword-arts. He’s managed to link everything together perfectly, making him very strong... and with those seven types of Dao lightning and Dao water supporting him, it makes sense that he can make it past level six hundred.

“Still, he’s at his limit. He’s only persisting out of sheer tenacity and stubbornness.”

The almighty Hegemon watched the scenes being displayed. Ji Ning had made it to the 602nd level, but he was clearly at a complete disadvantage when facing the eight golems on this level. Still, he continued to stubbornly hang on.

“To make it to the 602nd level is not,” the almighty Hegemon evaluated.

“Yes, not bad at all.”

“In the future, this kid just might be a match for Greatjoy.”

They all agreed with the Hegemon’s appraisal. Even Daolord Woodflower nodded in agreement, but he couldn’t help but sigh to himself. Alas, the seven Swordlords of the Sword Palace had all failed.

No one rebutted the almighty Hegemon, because they all knew how astute his vision and judgment was. He was able to completely see and understand how strong Ning was right now. If he said that this level was as far as Ning could go, that would definitely be the case.

.....

The Silvercloud World. Level six hundred and two of the altar.

Tired.

Ning was so tired.

These eight golems launched combined attacks against him. Terrifying flowers of fire and water continuously rained down upon him, and some of the golems repeatedly charged into close combat against him. Every single one was just as strong as Ning, and when the six joined forces they were able to completely suppress Ning! Ning had indeed only been able to just barely hang on for this long thanks to his extremely balanced sword-arts.

He wouldn’t admit defeat lightly. Once he gave up, he would have lost. Only by persevering would there be hope.

Ning strove to learn as much as he could from this very battle, pondering on his sword-arts flaws in real time as he continuously perfected them.

Rumble...

Attacks rained down from every direction, and Ning was like a little boat that was being rocked within a stormy sea that would capsize at any moment.

Ning had no idea that the almighty Hegemon and twelve golden-armored powers were watching him. Although they had a rather good opinion of him, they felt certain that this level was Ning's limit.

"Their attacks really are endless and omnipresent..." Although Ning's sword-arts were slowly improving, he still felt a sense of despair. Defeat would come at any moment.

# Chapter 22: A Dao Belonging to Ji Ning

“Omnipresent?” Surrounded and exhausted by the endless attacks from these many golems, the light of inspiration suddenly flickered in Ji Ning’s mind.

“Right. Their attacks are omnipresent. Some cast spells from afar, others close in on me and attack in melee using claws and palms. I only have six arms after using [Three Heads, Six Arms]; how can I possibly withstand so many attacks?” Ning was mumbling to himself as many different sword-arts went through his mind, with many insights regarding the Yin-Yang stance in particular coming to the forefront.

It was as though a thread was linking many small beads together, forming a true collective whole.

“Omnipresent...

“The true Yin-Yang stance shouldn’t result in me defending in such an exhausting manner. So what if I have six arms? Even if I had ten or eighteen arms, so what? There’s still a limit to what I can do!” Ning was beginning to awaken to the truth. “The true Yin-Yang stance should allow me to defend against all oncoming attacks, which means it needs to be omnipresent as well. It should envelope everything in its path, and any attacks that come forth should be blocked by it.

“That means... for the Yin-Yang stance to be truly powerful, it should be a domain! I need to transform this stance into a domain!”

Every single cultivator had a path that was most suited to them. Over the course of countless years, many major powers had chosen many different paths. At their level, there was no way they could imitate others any longer. If they did, it would actually have a negative influence on their own future insights. If you wished to draw a painting, it was best to start with a fresh, blank scroll of paper. The path of cultivation was best expressed through following one’s own heart, through slowly understanding and upgrading one’s insights to the point of fundamentally transforming them.

“Let my seven Dao lightnings and my seven Dao waters be my sword,” Ning murmured softly.

Rumble...

The Dao water and Dao lightning that had been in the surrounding area constricting the foes suddenly began to rumble. Although they were elemental lightning and water by nature, true experts of the Dao of the Sword could use anything as a sword. Flower petals, water drops, a single water drop... they could all be used as a sword. Now, Ning was using Dao water and Dao lightning as his blade.

“Dao lightning and Dao water, form my Yin-Yang stance and create my Yin-Yang Sword Domain.”

In recent years, Ning’s greatest achievements lay in the field of defense. All of his insights into the Yin-Yang stance, including some which he had previously felt to be rather unimportant, all came together in this stance as he generated a domain of sword-intent. He infused it with all of his insights, causing the power of this stance to instantly transform.

Rumble...

Every single streak of Dao lightning transformed into a sword! The ‘insides’ of the swords were made of lightning, but on the outside they had already been shaped and condensed into the form of a sword! The powerful sword-intent controlling the lightning was naturally giving birth to swordforce.

Every single stream of Dao water had also transformed into the shape of a sword.

They began to circle around Ning like an enormous whirlpool, but if one looked closely one would see that some of the streaks were swirling clockwise while others were swirling counter-clockwise. The mighty sword-intent controlling this technique caused parts of it to flow forwards and parts of it to flow backwards, creating an incredibly powerful tearing force!

What made white stand out? Only when the rest of a piece of parchment

was completely covered in black ink would a spot of blank whiteness in the center be dazzling to behold.

Ning's sword-intent was strong to begin with. Now that he had formed this technique with forward and reverse flows, the ripping, tearing power of his domain grew exponentially greater.

### Yin-Yang Polarity!

The concept of Yin and Yang was reinforcing this technique as well! The Yang-attribute Dao lightning and the Yin-attribute Dao water mutually reinforced each other, resulting in both being strengthened. Every so often, compatible streaks of lightning or water would brush against each other, resulting in even more terrifying force.

Both forwards and backwards, both gentle and violent.

An enormous domain had formed around Ning, covering an area of ten thousand kilometers. This domain was formed of sword-shaped lightning and water, but what made it truly terrifying was the sword-intent which Ning's Yin-Yang stance had manifested.

The sword-intent of the Yin-Yang stance had already undergone a fundamental transformation. Lightning and water flowed together, sometimes calm and sometimes explosive as it blasted at any foes which dared trespass!

"From this day forth, my Yin-Yang stance shall be the Yin-Yang Sword Domain." Ning smiled. Finally, one of his five stances of [Brightmoon] had truly transformed. In this moment, Ning clearly understood that the Yin-Yang Sword Domain was a path he would absolutely have to take in the region of defense as he became a Samsara Daolord.

"Careful."

"Quick!"

These golems were sentient. Once Ning formed that enormous Yin-Yang Sword Domain, the golems who were fighting within the reach of that domain instantly sensed multiple layers of force appear in the area. Sometimes, the force simply followed their movements; other times, the

force exploded against them with great violence. There was even the occasional sensation of being brutally ripped apart by layers of power!

The entire domain was filled with countless attacks that alternated between Yin and Yang. The attacks constantly changed and transformed, making it harder and harder for them to defend. The golems had to use roughly 90% of their power in defending against the Yin-Yang Sword Domain.

Boom! Ning charged forwards, sweeping out with his sword-light and sending a golem flying. The golems were so focused on defending against the domain that they were now extremely vulnerable to Ning. He was able to defeat them all with one strike.

Ning continued to advance.

603. 604. 605...

Ning slowly advanced, wielding six swords while keeping [Three Heads, Six Arms] active. His enormous Yin-Yang Sword Domain covered an area of ten thousand kilometers around him, but in truth its size was variable. He could easily expand it to make it a hundred million kilometers in size, but the ten thousand kilometer range was the range at which he could maintain peak levels of power. Beyond that range, the power of the domain would slowly begin to decay.

The Yin-Yang Sword Domain could also be used through flying swords and other magic treasures, or even Dao fire. Anything could be used to generate it. However, Ning had access to incredibly powerful Dao lightning and Dao water, which was why he used them to generate the domain.

A simple tree branch controlled by Ning's mighty sword-intent was now able to slay a Daolord of the First Step. The Dao lightning and Dao water were extraordinary elemental powers, and when they were used by the Yin-Yang Sword Domain they were able to produce truly enormous amounts of power.

.....

The imperial palace. The almighty Hegemon and the twelve golden-armored powers were seated on their thirteen thrones, staring at this sight.

After Ning's Yin-Yang stance transformed into the Yin-Yang Sword Domain, Ning was able to easily advance through the upcoming stages. However, none of the golden-armored powers cared about the fact that the almighty Hegemon's evaluation had been wrong! Instead, they simply watched in astonishment as Ning unleashed his sword-intent domain because they knew what this portended.

"He... has finally taken that first step," the almighty Hegemon said softly.

"Swordlord Darknorth is guaranteed to become one of the most supreme members of our Twelve Palaces." Daolord Thousand Waves nodded.

"For someone like him to end up in the Sword Palace instead of mine... what a pity, what a pity!" Daolord Yinwind shook his head.

Daolord Woodflower glanced sideways at him, then began to laugh in a very contented manner.

"Although Swordlord Darknorth's sword-intent domain is defensive in nature, every part of it is infused with terrifyingly strong attacks. If any enemies enter his domain, they will suffer attacks nonstop. Even the most powerful of foes will eventually be whittled down, making it so that they will be greatly weakened before even drawing close to him. A domain like this is guaranteed to be a terrifying thing to face. If he can become a Daolord of the Fourth Step... this sword-intent domain is powerful enough to allow him to suppress Eternal Emperors." A golden-armored power whose eyes were like two black vortices of darkness let out a soft sigh.

"Agreed."

The almighty Hegemon nodded. "He'll be able to suppress ordinary Eternal Emperors! For Swordlord Darknorth to take this step forward means that he has already discovered an Supreme Dao of defense for himself!"

"It is guaranteed that he will be a monster of a Daolord." Everyone

present nodded.

There were differences in personal Daos. Some Samsara Daolords walked a path of simple Daos and would be very weak. As Daolords of the First Step, they would merely have ordinary levels of power.

Emperor Mirrorsnow's Dao and his seventh stance, the Reincarnation stance, would have been enough for him to be acknowledged by the ancient pagodas. He used this path to become a Samsara Daolord, and his Dao was fairly formidable. As a Daolord of the First Step, he could match Daolords of the Second Step. However, a Dao like this just barely cleared the threshold of the ancient pagodas.

Prince Greatjoy, Heartlord Solewind, Ji Ning... their Daos were on a higher level! Ning had just created his Yin-Yang Sword Domain, but it was a level of power above the Reincarnation stance and much more profound.

"An Supreme Dao of defense." Daolord Thousand Waves let out a sigh. "The Sword Palace really hasn't had many individuals who have ever been able to come up with an Supreme Dao."

"Absolutely true." Lord Woodflower nodded. Every single major power would have an individual Dao that was best suited to them. Ning was able to develop his Yin-Yang Sword Domain, but others might come up with similarly strong sword-arts. So long as they were at the same general level, they would all be classified as an 'Ultimate'-class defensive Dao.

"If he follows this Dao to its conclusion, he definitely will be able to trample over Eternal Emperors once he becomes a Daolord of the Fourth Step." Daolord Thousand Waves laughed.

"He's still a bit lacking compared to Palace Lord Dawnstar," Daolord Yinwind said. "Lord Dawnstar, at the World level, developed three Supreme Daos and then merged them together perfectly! After he became a Daolord of the Fourth Step, he was able to slay an Eternal Emperor with just three strokes of his blade. Although Swordlord Darknorth is impressive, he will only be able to suppress Eternal Emperors. Killing them will be a matter of luck."

"True." Everyone present agreed.

“But Bertulu and Eastcult do have a chance of reaching Lord Dawnstar’s level.” The almighty Hegemon agreed with this assessment as well. “Still... given that Darknorth has come up with an Ultimate-class defensive Dao, he’ll still be able to withstand them in an actual battle. He should be classified as someone on the same level as them.”

Eastcult had come up with Supreme Daos for both offense and defense, and had been able to merge them perfectly. This was why he was a match for Bertulu.

“True. Him having taken this step means he is guaranteed to be a monster of a Daolord.” Lord Woodflower was in a splendid mood.

Previously, these golden-armored figures had all referred to Ji Ning as ‘this kid’. Now that Ning had taken this step, they all referred to him as ‘Darknorth’ or ‘Swordlord Darknorth’, because in their hearts they viewed Ning as someone who would be a true equal!

“However... Supreme Daos are also the most difficult Daos for gaining eternity.” The almighty Hegemon let out a soft sigh.

“They are indeed hard, but to choose this path means he will definitely be an extraordinary figure,” Daolord Thousand Waves said.

Daolord Allgod, Daolord Featherdress, Palace Lord Dawnstar... they had all chosen the path of an Ultimate-class Dao. As a result, becoming an Eternal Empero would be incredibly difficult. Still... while they were alive, they were amongst the most illustrious, distinguished figures of all the Endless Territories.

The almighty Hegemon and the others were sighing in amazement over Ning’s prowess, but they had no idea that this was merely the evolution of the Yin-Yang stance, one of five stances in Ning’s [Brightmoon] sword-art. Ning’s plan was to reach the apex with his other four stances as well! He was going to find suitable Daos for his other four stances, then infuse all of their mysteries into his own sword-arts. This was Ning’s true goal.

Right now, he had developed an Supreme Dao of defense, the Yin-Yang Sword Domain... but this was just the beginning!

“Six hundred sixty. Six hundred seventy. Six hundred eighty...” Daolord Woodflower watched as Ning continuously advanced up the steps of the altar, and the smile on his face continued to widen.

# Chapter 23: The Dust Settles

As Daolord Yinwind watched Ji Ning advanced past level six hundred and eighty, he couldn't help but feel resigned. Even the best performing member of his Saber Palace, Saberlord RedSnow, had only made it to level 680. "For Heartlord Solewind to give such an impressive performance was expected, but Greatjoy's improvements were truly shocking. He was even better than Solewind! And now, this Darknorth fellow has appeared as well."

Ning continued to advance past multiple floors.

"Kill!"

Boom!

The attacks of the ancient golems were strong enough to sunder Heaven and Earth, and they came at Ning from all directions.

As Ning walked forwards, his Yin-Yang Sword Domain formed a region of wild, dark chaos around him. One could vaguely see the flickering of lightning and water within this region, and the region itself stretched out to be more than ten thousand kilometers wide. All enemies who sought to move close to Ning had to be able to first withstand the assaults of the Yin-Yang Sword Domain.

"Break!"

"Go."

Ning's swords were sometimes ephemeral and unpredictable, sometimes as heavy and weighty as a mountain. However, the speed at which he walked began to slow down. Clearly, the pressure was starting to increase.

"Six hundred ninety. Six hundred ninety-five. Six hundred ninety-six..." Daolord Woodflower had a look of delight on his face.

"He broke through level seven hundred!"

Ning continued to advance, albeit with great difficulty as he began to move slower and slower. Even though the Yin-Yang Sword Domain was

helping him out, he was finding it harder and harder to deal with the increasingly powerful golems.

Boom!

Ning's sword-arts were finally breached on level 705. Although they came out in a perfect, flawless cycle, they still crumbled when faced with the overwhelming power that had been brought to bear upon them.

Outside the Daolord Cloudworld. A white-robed, rather bedraggled-looking Ning suddenly appeared, a look of worry in his eyes. "I wonder if I made it into the top four."

"However... I have to say that my performance was better than I expected. I actually ended up developing a defensive Dao." Ning felt both content and worried. His sword-arts had reached an extremely high level, but his opponents were the greatest World-level geniuses of the Twelve Palaces. He couldn't help but think back to that time when he had sparred against Bertulu. Only now did realize what a truly profound level Bertulu had reached!

This was because... Bertulu was at a level of insight that was most likely one level higher than the current Ji Ning's! Only when Ning himself improved did he truly understand how great the distance had been between the two of them. Back when he had been at the Astral Islands, Ning only had the vague sense that the man had a higher level of understanding than he did. As to how much higher, exactly? He couldn't say for sure. Bertulu hadn't even used his true form, after all; he had merely used his human form to spar against Ning.

"However... now, even if Bertulu was to attack me with all his power, I would not need to be afraid of him," Ning mused.

His Yin-Yang Sword Domain was an extremely defensive skill! Even if Ning faced opponents who were stronger than him, he would still be able to defend against them.

"Darknorth." Suddenly, a voice rang out within Ning's mind.

"Eh?" Ning turned to look towards the direction of Lord Woodflower's

estate.

“Come here immediately,” Lord Woodflower sent.

“Yes.” Ning immediately transformed into a streak of light and flew towards the estate. Soon, he reached Lord Woodflower’s estate, and Lord Woodflower himself was standing at the entrance, a smile on his face as he looked at Ning. “Come in, Darknorth.”

“What is it, senior apprentice-brother?” Ning was a bit nervous. He didn’t know if he had made it into the top four or not.

“Damned impressive. The almighty Hegemon and the others all saw you use that sword-intent domain of yours.” Lord Woodflower was in such a delightful mood that he was positively beaming. For his Sword Palace to completely crush the Saber Palace in such a way was absolutely wonderful!

The two palaces had been at loggerheads and competing against each other since time immemorial.

“That was something I just came up with it. I call it the Yin-Yang Sword Domain.” Ning laughed. “I was just lucky. I had already prepared seven types of Dao lightning and Dao water, and I was able to use them to create my Yin-Yang Sword Domain. If I had been using any other types of treasures, the power of my domain would’ve been much weaker.”

“The Dao lightning and the Dao water aren’t that impressive. It is your sword-intent which truly impresses.” Lord Woodflower couldn’t help but praise Ning.

Ning chuckled.

Even if he merely used a single, ordinary flying sword, his Yin-Yang Sword Domain would still cause it to naturally emanate an aura of swordforce. The power of the domain would still have twenty to thirty percent of the power of a domain formed through using Dao lightning and Dao water. At this level, even if he merely used his Immortal energy to manifest a sword and swordforce, he would still be able to create an extremely powerful domain with it.

“Without the Dao water and the Dao lightning, I probably wouldn’t have

been able to make it much farther past level six hundred and ninety,” Ning said. He couldn’t help but ask, “Senior apprentice-brother, do I have a shot at the top four?”

Only the top four would be granted the ‘opportunity’.

“You do.” Lord Woodflower nodded. “A very good shot, in fact. But of course, the three days haven’t ended and there are still World-level cultivators challenging the Daolord Cloudworld. Nothing is certain until the final cultivator concludes his attempts.”

“Oh.” Ning nodded. “Then how is my ranking?”

“Right now, you are ranked second,” Lord Woodflower said. “Prince Greatjoy is ranked first, and he made it to floor seven hundred and nineteen. Heartlord Solewind is ranked third, and he made it to floor six hundred and ninety-two. Fourth is Saberlord Redsnow, who stopped on floor six hundred and eighty.”

“Redsnow?” Ning stared.

“Something wrong?” Lord Woodflower asked.

“Nothing, nothing.” Ning immediately shook his head. “I just thought of an old friend, that’s all.”

Daoist Threelives’ most powerful general had been Redsnow. Redsnow had eventually chosen to follow Ning as well, then had become apprenticed to Subhuti as well. He shared the exact same Daoist title as this Saberlord Redsnow. Still, it was quite common to encounter cultivators with the same or similar nicknames. There were countless people in every chaosworld who shared the same name, and for a few of the more powerful cultivators to also share the same Daoist title wasn’t that surprising.

“Wasn’t the Saber Palace bragging a lot about how well they would do?” Ning asked.

“Ahaha, their boasting skills were quite profound, yes.” Lord Woodflower let out a laugh, but then he couldn’t help but sigh as well. “To be honest, they were qualified to boast. The fourth, fifth, and sixth-ranked experts all

belong to the Saber Palace. We all knew that Heartlord Solewind would be formidable, but you and Prince Greatjoy caught everyone offguard.”

“Prince Greatjoy?” Ning listened attentively. He was quite curious about this man who had made it even farther within the Silvercloud World than he himself had.

“He’s also been improving quite rapidly. He actually managed to come up with two Supreme Daos.” Lord Woodflower let out a sigh. “If he can link his two Supreme Daos, he’ll probably be on par with Eastcult and Bertulu.”

Ning nodded. It was necessary to fuse Supreme Daos together in some manner.

For example, the five stances of Ning’s [Brightmoon] sword-art were all linked together thanks to his Reincarnation sword-intent. If you weren’t able to perfectly join your sword-arts together, you would have flaws when you fought in battle.

True experts had to have powerful defenses. Only then would they be able to survive for a long time. But of course, their attacks had to be strong as well; only then would they be able to slay foes! If Ning’s attacks had been just a bit stronger, he would’ve been able to advance quite a bit further up the altar within the Silvercloud World.

“Ah!” A look of shock suddenly appeared on Lord Woodflower’s face.

“What’s wrong?” Ning looked at Lord Woodflower.

“I’ll tell you in a moment.” Lord Woodflower didn’t explain in detail. Clearly, his incarnation was watching something happen within the imperial palace.

Ning was incredibly curious as to what Lord Woodflower was watching, but he had no choice but to tamp down his curiosity. A long while later, Lord Woodflower suddenly began to laugh. “Ahaha. Pride really does cometh before a fall.”

“Senior apprentice-brother?” Ning was puzzled.

“A World-level cultivator belonging to the Palace of Kindwater, a fellow named Waterlord Firesurge, actually made it all the way to level six hundred and eighty-seven,” Lord Woodflower said.

“In other words, even farther than Saberlord RedSnow?” Ning stared.

“Right. The Saber Palace didn’t get a single slot in the top four!” Lord Woodflower roared with laughter. “Oh, this is just wonderful! When I saw that ugly look on Yinwind’s ugly face... oh, that was simply delightful. Hah! That fellow usually loves to strut about and put on airs in front of me.”

Ning felt amazed as well. In the end, the most famous Saber Palace had actually been completely defeated. Then again... the geniuses of the Twelve Palaces couldn’t be evaluated using common measures. Greatjoy, Darknorth, and Firesurge... these three had only displayed their true brilliance during this competition.

“He’s a member of the Kindwater Palace. Why is his Daoist title ‘Firesurge’?” Ning was puzzled.

“He’s another person who started off as a mortal cultivator. I heard that he originally was primarily a cultivator in the Dao of Fire. However, due to some trouble he apparently ran into within the sect he was in as a mortal, he ended up choosing the Dao of Water instead. However, by then his Daoist title had already been chosen, and so he simply continued to use it,” Lord Woodflower explained. The Twelve Palaces didn’t have that many World-level cultivators, and so he obviously was familiar with the vast majority of them.

Ning nodded.

Some cultivators would change their Daoist titles once they reached a certain level of power. Ning was another example of a person who had chosen his Daoist title, ‘Darknorth’, a long time ago. He had never changed it.

“Let’s wait for just another moment. There is one final World-level cultivator attempting the trials,” Lord Woodflower said.

A short while later...

“Alright, all done. The results are in. Prince Greatjoy, yourself, Heartlord Solewind, and Waterlord Firesurge will be the ones to partake in this opportunity,” Lord Woodflower said.

“And what opportunity is this, exactly?” Although Ning felt quite excited, he also felt quite curious as to what this was all about. All he knew was that this was an ‘incredible’ opportunity, one which no one seemed to know much about.

“Don’t ask. When you meet the almighty Hegemon, you’ll know,” Lord Woodflower said.

“Meet the almighty Hegemon?” Ning was stunned.

“Right. The almighty Hegemon has already issued a summons to the four of you. Hurry over to the place where the Imperials reside,” Lord Woodflower said.

# Chapter 24: The First Meeting

The Twelve Palaces were tightly connected to the Brightshore Imperials, and so there were spacetime transfer arrays linking the palaces to the territory of the Imperials.

Rumble...

Spacetime twisted around Ji Ning. Once everything went still, he swept the area with his gaze. “So this is the imperial palace?”

Although all twelve of the palaces of the Brightshore Kingdom were extremely large and covered with many formations, the true center of the kingdom remained the imperial palace! Before Ning was an utterly, breathtakingly large palace that was as white as snow, with gold, black, and blue accents covering parts of it.

Just looking at the imperial palace, Ning sensed an aura of incredible presence and might. He felt as though he was looking up at the stars themselves.

“I heard that the Imperials generally live here in the imperial palace. I wonder how many defenses the almighty Hegemon had placed around his headquarters,” Ning mused.

Ning emerged from the array and began to walk towards the palace gates of the enormous imperial palace.

There were no people before the palace at all, just two gray statues. One was of a humanoid wielding a spear, the second was of a dragon-like creature that was coiled around itself.

“Halt.” The humanoid statue suddenly spoke out in a grating voice as it stared at Ning.

“Whaaaaat?!” Ning was badly startled. “Its alive?!”

He could now be considered a powerful expert. After unleashing his Yin-Yang Sword Domain, he was a match for most Daolords of the Second Step, and thus he had extremely keen senses towards life and the aura of life. He would be able to easily detect the aura of a tiny mosquito from a

million kilometers away! However, his senses were clearly telling him that this statue before him was nothing more than an ordinary statue, an inert hunk of rock. How, then, was it speaking?

“Have you come to see the Hegemon?” The gray humanoid statue was almost as tall as the palace gates, and it stared down at Ning.

“Yes.” Ning nodded. Although his senses were still telling him that this statue was an inert hunk of rock, he couldn’t help but feel an inexplicable hint of fear.

“Enter after all four have arrived,” the gray humanoid statue said coldly.

Ning had no choice but to stand there and wait quietly. After enough time passed to brew a kettle of tea, the nearby spacetime transfer array once more lit up. Once the light subsided, a skinny bald youth dressed in loose red robes had appeared within it. The youth’s face was covered with strange divine red tattoos that seemed to extrude an aura of special charm. Ning only had to glance at them to feel that they were exerting an effect upon him.

“I am Solewind.” The bald, red-robed youth strolled forwards, then smiled. “Greetings, Swordlord Darknorth.”

“Heartlord Solewind.” Ning greeted the man. The Heartforce Palace had very few cultivators, and the only World-level cultivator acknowledged by the ancient pagodas was Heartlord Solewind. Ning had heard of this man long ago. This was no dabbler like Bertulu; this was a man who had truly poured all of his effort into being a Heartforce Cultivator, and his abilities were truly unfathomable.

“Swordlord Darknorth, you actually made it farther into the Silvercloud World’s great altar than I did.” Heartlord Solewind smiled in a gentle, warm fashion. “I heard that you were abducted by the almighty Hegemon to our Brightshore Kingdom roughly two thousand years ago. For you to reach such a level of power in such a short period of time... Solewind truly admires you.”

Ning was instantly speechless. The man even knew about him having been abducted by the almighty Hegemon two thousand years ago? News

had certainly spread quite fast!

“No need to feel surprised, Swordlord Darknorth. It was one of my elder brothers in the Heartforce Palace who informed me of this,” Heartlord Solewind said with a laugh. “The Heartforce Palace has very few cultivators within it, and we all treat each other as we would our actual siblings. We hold nothing back from each other.”

Ning suddenly remembered that the entire Heartforce Palace held less than ten Samsara Daolords! Most of those Samsara Daolords were out wandering the primordial chaos, leaving no more than two or three who actually resided within the palace itself. Compared to the other eleven palaces, the Heartforce Palace really did have pitifully few members. Ning could fully understand how this would result in them treating each other as they would actual siblings.

“Swordlord Darknorth, if you wish you can simply address me as Solewind.” Heartlord Solewind smiled.

“Then you can address me as Darknorth, brother Solewind,” Ning said. In his heart, he couldn’t help but feel astonished. Why was it that a simple smile from Solewind caused Ning to have such a good impression of him? His voice alone was enough to make it impossible for others to hate him!

Rumble...

The spacetime transfer array once more lit up, and moments later a youth dressed in deep blue robes emerged. He had a cold, forbidding face, and he emanated an aura of baleful energy. As soon as he emerged he saw Ning and Solewind, and he immediately called out, “Greetings, Heartlord Solewind and Swordlord Darknorth.”

“Are you Waterlord Firesurge? No need to stand on such ceremony. You can simply address us as Solewind and Darknorth,” Heartlord Solewind said, and Ning nodded.

“I was lucky enough to be ranked number four, but I fear I’ll need your help in the future.” Although the blue-robed youth had a cold and forboding aura, his words were quite courteous and respectful. Both Solewind and Ning felt quite kindly disposed towards him.

No matter what, they were all members of the Twelve Palaces who had sworn lifeblood oaths not to attack each other. Given that they were ranked in the top four, all of them would clearly be extraordinary figures in the future. So long as they were able to survive, they would all become major powers who would shock the rest of the primordial chaos. It was natural for them to wish to befriend each other.

The three chatted idly for a time, slowly growing more familiar with each other's personalities and traits.

Finally, the last member arrived.

This was a man dressed in black imperial robes who wore a royal crown. His skin was as clear as jade, and his eyes were as deep as the abyss between the stars. Even the likes of Ji Ning, Firesurge, and Solewind couldn't help but mentally sigh in amazement. In terms of appearance and aura, at least, this 'Prince Greatjoy' was definitely number one amongst the four.

"So the three of you have already arrived? Please pardon me for having arrived late. Greatjoy feels quite ashamed at having made you wait." Prince Greatjoy was as courteous as the stories said he was... but of course the stories also said that deep down, he was actually quite a berserk fellow.

"We just arrived a short while ago."

"Brother Greatjoy, you ranked number one in this trial. I imagine that you are probably on par with Bertulu and Eastcult."

The four began to casually chat amongst themselves. Although they were all quite relaxed, none of them dared to underestimate any of the other three, as they were all quite close in power. They belonged to the same general level of strength, even though there were differences with regards to how far they had made it in the Silvercloud World. If they were to get into an actual fight, it was hard to say who would win. In addition, the trial of the Silvercloud World was a trial where many sources of outside help were banned, such as Dao-seals or golems. Given how extraordinary they all were, all of them had clearly experienced

tremendous strokes of karmic luck in the past!

“The Hegemon has summoned the four of you. Go on inside.” The giant humanoid statue stared down at the four tiny dots below it as it spoke in a cold voice.

“The two statues standing in front of the imperial palace are the two great guardians of the imperial palace,” Heartlord Solewind sent mentally. “I heard that long ago, during the era when the almighty Hegemon was first establishing his reputation, he led these two great guardians into battle and slew countless major powers with them.”

“Oh?” Ning, Greatjoy, and Firesurge both listened attentively.

The members of the Heartforce Palace shared a particularly close relationship with each other, and so Heartlord Solewind knew many more secrets than most members of the other palaces.

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Although Ning was quite intrigued about the history of these two giant statues, he didn’t pay them too much mind as he entered the imperial palace.

Once they stepped past the gates and saw the towering palace, the four of them could sense spacetime twisting around them as they were teleported away once more.

They had been brought to a region filled with empty space with a few chaos stars sprinkled throughout it.

Ning and the others all stared at their surroundings as they appeared in this place.

“What is this place?” All four of them were rather puzzled. This region was simply too silent, as still as a pool of water. The primordial chaos should generally be filled with many types of voidstorms and chaos waves, and it would generally be filled with boundless amounts of chaos energy! However, the empty region they were in was utterly enormous and completely devoid of primordial chaos.

Whoosh.

The void before them suddenly parted like a curtain of water as an incomparably massive behemoth suddenly appeared. This behemoth had two enormous eyes that were like blazing stars, but it gazed towards Ning and the other three in a very gentle manner. When it spoke, its voice was similarly gentle, but it echoed throughout every single inch of this region. “Greetings, my four young fellows.”

Greatjoy, Solewind, Firesurge, and Ning were all shocked.

Ning couldn’t help but think back to the scene of him and the other World-level cultivators being swallowed up by the head of an enormous behemoth, then being teleported to the Brightshore Kingdom.

“Greetings, Hegemon.” Ning and the other three all bowed respectfully. There was no need to kneel or kowtow; the Hegemon generally treated the members of the Twelve Palaces quite well.

“You four young fellows have earned a rare opportunity for yourselves,” the towering behemoth said. “You shall head out alongside a member of my Imperials known as Skyfire Brightshore, and then you shall enter the Archaeus region of an alternate universe. This region is one of the most legendary locations of this alternate universe, and it is filled with many dangers. It is also, however, filled with many opportunities. I’ve chosen the four of you because I hope that you will help my young clansman, Skyfire Brightshore, as much as you can and give him a better chance at surviving. But of course, I will reward you heavily for the services you have rendered to myself and Skyfire.”

# Chapter 25: Following Master

Ji Ning and the others were all intrigued. In truth, they had all suspected long ago that the reason why the almighty Hegemon had chosen the four of them from the Twelve Palaces was to have them assist Skyfire Brightshore. However, the reason why the Twelve Palaces had been on such good terms with the Brightshore Imperials for so long was precisely because they treated each other as equals. Ning and the others were all extraordinary figures, and they wouldn't be expected to risk their lives for the Imperials without being compensated at all.

“Once you return from the alternate universe, I’ll speak with Skyfire Brightshore. The more assistance you provided to him, the greater our gratitude shall be,” the towering behemoth said.

“Do not worry, Hegemon. We will definitely do everything we can.”

“Since we are travelling together, we shall definitely do our best to support each other.”

All of them spoke out in unison.

They all knew that since the Hegemon said he would ‘reward them heavily’, the rewards for this mission would definitely be extraordinary. The Hegemon was someone who had stood at the very top of the Endless Territories for countless years, after all. He had existed for even longer than the Brightshore Kingdom itself had existed.

A ‘heavy reward’ from someone like him was indeed more than enough to convince Ning and the others to do their absolute utmost in protecting Skyfire Brightshore in his journey to the alternate universe.

“Good.” The towering behemoth nodded slightly.

Rumble...

Yet another spacetime vortex appeared next to Ning’s group. Moments later, a strange beast bathed in blazing flames suddenly emerged.

“Skyfire.” The towering behemoth nodded.

“Hegemon.” The blazing beast immediately transformed into the shape of a fiery-haired youth who wore a suit of azure armor.

“It shall be the five of you who will travel to the alternate universe,” the towering behemoth said.

The fiery-haired youth swept the four with his gaze, closely scrutinizing them. He then cracked a smile. “My name is Skyfire Brightshore, but you can just call me Skyfire. I heard from the Hegemon that none of the four chosen ones are weaker than I am. Once we go to the alternate universe, I’ll have to trouble you to help me out.”

Although Skyfire Brightshore was an incredibly talented member of the race of Brightshore Imperials, he was still just a new member who had been brought back just a short while ago. Ning and the others had all developed at least one Supreme Dao and were comparable to Daolords of the Second Step. Indeed, all of them were somewhat more powerful than Skyfire Brightshore. But of course, this was only true if they factored in their ‘normal’ combat power. There was no way to calculate the power of any trump cards or single-use items which they were keeping hidden up their sleeves.

“Hegemon, where is this ‘Archaeus region’ and what is this ‘alternate universe’?” Prince Greatjoy asked. He was nothing more than an honorary disciple of the almighty Hegemon, and he wasn’t truly qualified to address the Hegemon as ‘Master’. According to the almighty Hegemon’s rules, only his personal disciples were qualified to call him ‘Master’.

“The alternate universe?” The towering behemoth smiled as it saw the looks of eagerness appear on the faces of Ning and the others. “By now, all of you should have sensed that the Endless Territories have certain prime essences within it. There is a prime essence of fire, a prime essence of water, a prime essence of the sword, a prime essence of space, a prime essence of time...”

Ning and the others nodded. Everyone could sense the prime essences. However, attuning to the prime essences was only able to help one advance to the level of full mastery as a World-level cultivator. As for the

more profound mysteries, the prime essences kept them bottled up internally and emanated none of them at all. Supposedly, not even Eternal Emperors could enter the prime essences and train in those mysteries. Thus, Samsara Daolords had to find and develop a Dao which suited themselves, one slow step at a time.

“The vast region which is covered by the power of the prime essences is known as a ‘universe’,” the almighty Hegemon said. “An ‘alternate universe’ naturally refers to a place which has completely different prime essences.”

“What?!” Ning and the others were all stunned. Different prime essences?

The Three Realms, the Badlands Territory, the Brightshore Kingdom... Ning had been able to sense the prime essence of the sword in all these places. The prime essence of the sword was unchanging, and the vast Endless Territories were nothing more than a part of an enormous universe! But now, it seemed as though he was going to head off into a completely different universe?

“Do not worry. The outermost layers of the prime essences of this alternate universe, such as the prime essence of water, the prime essence of time, the prime essence of the sword, etc., are all the same as ours. Only the inner layers differ,” the almighty Hegemon said. “Thus, your power shall not be impacted whatsoever.”

“Has anyone ever been to this place?” Waterlord Firesurge couldn’t help but ask.

“None.” The almighty Hegemon shook his head.

Ning and the others were instantly rendered speechless.

“Long ago, as I attuned myself to the nature of spacetime, I was able to dimly sense the traces of an alternate universe that was quite close to our own universe, and so I opened a transversal conduit between our two universe,” the towering behemoth said. “However, the transversal conduit is rather weak, because it is constantly being disrupted by the differing laws of our two universes. Thus, only those below the Daolord level of

power are able to enter it.

“Thus, once you head off into this alternate universe, you absolutely must not allow yourselves to break through to the Daolord level. If you do break through, you will never be able to return. You will have to forever stay within that alternate universe,” the towering behemoth instructed.

Ning and the others nodded. So due to the different laws of the two universes, there was no way for Daolords to pass through this transversal conduit.

“However, World-level cultivators can pass through this conduit with no danger whatsoever,” the towering behemoth said. “Just a few days ago, I sent one of my World-level servants through the dimension conduit to do some exploring, then brought him back safely. Over the course of countless years, I’ve also managed to capture quite a few World-level cultivators of the alternate universe and bring them to ours.”

“Capture?” Ning and the others were secretly speechless. The almighty Hegemon was unable to go personally, but was still able to capture people?

“Thus, this transversal conduit is completely safe,” the towering behemoth said. “Given how strong you are, I trust that you will not encounter much danger when you journey through the territories of the alternate universe. The true trial will begin once you reach their Archaeus region!”

Ning and the other four listened attentively. Not even Skyfire Brightshore knew much about this ‘Archaeus region’.

“The Archaeus region is the most mysterious region in this alternate universe. It takes up an extremely vast region of space, so vast that I imagine there are very few cultivators who even know how large it truly is. Supposedly, there are many Daolords and even Eternal Emperors who seclude themselves throughout the Archaeus region.” The towering behemoth laughed. “This Archaeus region is so vast that it is most likely as large as our entire Endless Territories.”

“What?!” Ning and the others were all speechless.

They had originally thought that this Archaeus region would be some sort of secret world or location. Now, it seemed, it was a place that was almost as vast as their entire Endless Territories.

“That place is the core of that entire alternate universe, the place where the alternate universe sprang from. Countless cultivators in that universe dream of entering the Archaeus region, because everyone who manages to survive their journey through it will return completely transformed,” the towering behemoth said. “However... if you barge into the Archaeus region, you will immediately be assaulted and annihilated by the full force of the entire Archaeus region itself. You’ll be instantly reduced to dust and your truesoul vaporized.”

Ning and the others were truly at a loss for words. If the entire region was the size of the Endless Territories... how terrifying would an attack launched with the full might of that region be?

“That place is the core of the entire alternate universe, after all.” The towering behemoth continued, “Everyone who wishes to enter the place has to first bind an Archaeus medallion. After doing so, you’ll be able to enter it safely and won’t be expelled by the power of the region.”

“Archaeus medallions are extremely rare. I sent my will into the alternate universe and spread it across an extremely wide area, then kidnapped the World-level cultivators who passed through the area. It took me countless years to accumulate just a few Archaeus medallions,” the towering behemoth said. “Here are the five Archaeus medallions. Take them and bind them.”

Swoosh. Swoosh. Swoosh. Swoosh. Swoosh.

Five streaks of light appeared out of nowhere and flew towards Ning and the other four.

The Archaeus medallions were dark-red disc-shaped medallions that were covered with ancient, complicated runes. Ning and the others didn’t understand the runes, but could sense that they came from a long time ago, in a universe that was far, far away. They all bound the medallions.

“Hegemon.” Ning spoke out. “Will we be permitted to bring our retainers

and servants into the alternate universe? Are they allowed to enter the Archaeus region?"

The others all looked at the Hegemon, because they all had retainers and servants as well.

"Anyone below the Daolord level can make use of the transversal conduit," the almighty Hegemon said. "As for the Archaeus region... they will have to perpetually hide within your estate-world treasures, and they can't let any of their auras leak out at all. If they reveal themselves within the Archaeus region, they'll suffer an immediate attack from the power of the region. However, if they continuously hide without coming out they will be safe."

Ning and the others now understood. They would not be able to leave the estate-worlds or even sent out their aura or godsense. If that was the case, there was no real point to bringing them.

"But of course, if you were able to acquire more Archaeus medallions, you could gift them to your retainers and servants. They would then be qualified to enter the Archaeus region as well," the almighty Hegemon suddenly said. "Still, I urge you to be more low-key when you enter the Archaeus region, as it holds quite a few truly powerful Daolords."

"Here is a star map of the alternate universe. It includes all the markers you need to travel from the transversal conduit's exit to the Archaeus region, as well as some information regarding this universe. Remember, you are not to reveal this to others." As the almighty Hegemon spoke, he bestowed five sets of star maps upon them.

"Understood." Ning and the other four accepted the maps.

"Make your preparations. Three days from now, we shall meet again outside the imperial palace," the almighty Hegemon instructed.

Ning returned to the Sword Palace, then met with World God Pillsaint and Su Youji.

"A tremendous opportunity has been made available to me. I'll be heading to an extremely dangerous place. If you follow me, there's a slim

chance that you'll gain some karmic fortune from it as well. But of course, when I die you will die as well," Ning said. "Shall you follow me or will you remain here in the Sword Palace?"

"I'll follow you, Master." Su Youji didn't hesitate at all.

"I'm not allowed to learn any of the techniques or secret arts of the Twelve Palaces. Of course I'll follow you, Master!" Pillsaint agreed.

Ning nodded slowly upon seeing this. He couldn't promise them anything. He hadn't even visited this alternate universe before, after all.

Three days later, Ji Ning, Solewind, Firesurge, Greatjoy, and Skyfire Brightjoy all gathered together before the gates of the imperial palace.

"Everyone." The gray humanoid statue suddenly walked towards Ning and the other four. "I shall escort the five of you to the transversal conduit."

# Chapter 26: Entering the Alternate Universe

The grayish humanoid statue first made some slight alterations to the spacetime transfer array in front of the imperial palace, then activated it.

Ji Ning, Solewind, Firesurge, Greatjoy, and Skyfire could sense spacetime twisting around them. Soon, everything went silent.

“Eh?” Ning and the others stared at their new surroundings.

They were at the peak of a towering mountain that was levitating in empty space. At the very apex of the mountain peak sat a white-bearded old man dressed in snowy robes who had six curved horns on his head. Ning and the others had seen the almighty Hegemon’s true form before, and they immediately recognized the old man’s aura as that of the Hegemon’s. They immediately bowed respectfully. “Hegemon.”

“This place here is the transversal conduit.” The white-bearded old man pointed at a place halfway up the mountain. At first glance it seemed quite ordinary, but a more careful examination revealed a series of faint, concentric spacetime ripples emanating an aura of incredible power. If the transversal conduit was to collapse with them inside, they would probably all perish.

“Once you enter the alternate universe, even items like ‘truesoul towers’ and ‘heart lamps’ will no longer be able to detect whether or not you are still alive, to say nothing of ordinary life tablets,” the white-bearded elder said. “These are two completely separate universes, after all. But of course, if you have trained in some sort of cloning technique, you can leave a clone behind in this universe. If the other clones all perish, you can rebuild them with your backup clone. That’s one way to tell if you are alive or not.”

“Alright.” Ning and the others all nodded.

Heart lamps and truesoul towers were attuned directly to one’s truesoul. Even if one entered the most deadly of locations, they would still be able to

sense the presence of your truesoul. Alas, if you entered an alternate universe they would be useless.

Life tablets were the most simple and common items used to determine if someone was alive or not. Many special locations were able to completely block the effect of life tablets. In fact, a sufficiently great distance would also be enough to make it impossible for a life tablet to function.

“No one will be able to assist you on this journey to this alternate universe. Everything will all be up to yourselves,” the white-bearded elder said. “Go in. After you enter the conduit, make sure you remember to only go forwards and follow the flow.”

“Understood,” Ning and the other four acknowledged. They then all turned to walk towards those the seemingly ordinary, concentric spacetime ripples. As the five moved closer to the ripples, they quickly began to feel as though they had been dragged into a powerful spacetime whirlpool.

The journey through the transversal conduit started off quite calm and peaceful. Soon, however, Ning and the others could sense how space and time were twisting and distorting around them, as were many of the laws they had taken for granted. This was quite a miserable feeling; even their truesouls felt stifled and choked.

“Let’s move faster,” Prince Greatjoy growled.

“Forwards!” Ning urged.

They all suppressed the nauseous feelings they had as they hurriedly flew forwards. In front of them was a dark tunnel which had been formed by rings of spacetime vortices. The black tunnel seemingly had no exit, and the laws of both universes were in force throughout the tunnel. Thankfully, Ning and the others had not yet reached the Daolord level, and so the disturbance they created was fairly minor. If a true Daolord had dared to make use of this transversal conduit, it was very likely that the two differing laws of the two universes would’ve crushed him to death.

Whoosh. Ning and the others continued to fly forwards at high speed.

“Why is this tunnel so long?”

“How long is this transversal conduit? There seems to be no end to it!”

Ning and the others had been flying for more than two hours by now, but they were still stuck within that tunnel of darkness. They all felt quite nauseous, but at least they weren’t at risk of losing their lives. They were all able to resist the uncomfortable feelings.

Heartlord Solewind sent mentally to the others, “The Hegemon told us to just keep pressing onwards after we enter the tunnel. Let’s just keep flying like this. Sooner or later, we’ll reach the exit.”

“Right.” Waterlord Firesurge nodded as well.

“A transversal conduit which links two universes. Today, I’ve finally seen such a thing with my own eyes.” Prince Greatjoy laughed loudly.

The five of them chatted as they continued to fly forwards, but they soon ran out of topics to talk about and so just continued to fly in silence.

One day. Two days. Three days...

Ning had never imagined that this transversal conduit would be so long. If this was ‘normal’ flying, he wouldn’t have minded, but this was a place where the laws of two universes were clashing against each other. Every second here felt like an entire miserable year. Why hadn’t the almighty Hegemon warned them about this? Most likely, he wanted to use it to temper their hearts and wills.

In the blink of an eye, three full years went by.

“Wait, what’s that?”

“Is that the exit?”

“I think that’s the exit.”

Ning and the others had been flying silently when suddenly, they all revealed looks of great joy. They saw some light sparkling up ahead, breaking up the monotonous darkness of the transversal conduit. It didn’t seem as though there was anything past those sparkles of light. It seemed as though they had reached the end.

“Keep flying.” They had no other options but to fly straight towards the light.

Whoosh. Whoosh. Whoosh. Whoosh. Whoosh. The five of them all flew out of the darkness.

“What is this place?” The five of them found themselves within a region of drifting primordial chaos. In front of them was an enormous chaos star that blazed like a giant ball of fire. Due to its close proximity the surrounding area was illuminated quite brightly by this chaos star.

Ning and the others turned to look behind them, only to see an enormous spatial vortex.

“I imagine there aren’t many who would dare to enter this spatial vortex,” Heartlord Solewind laughed.

Ning nodded.

He himself had arrived in the Badlands Territory by leaving the Three Realms through a spatial vortex. There were quite a few such vortices in the Endless Territories, but because most were naturally formed they often contained unknown dangers. Generally speaking, cultivators wouldn’t dare to risk their lives within one of them.

But of course, there were always those like ‘Old Man Yuan’ or Godfiend Witherspike who would enter the vortices because they were being chased and had nowhere else to flee. They had no choice but to flee into the most dangerous of places.

“Even if they made it through and were lucky enough to survive... on the other side is the Hegemon himself.” Prince Greatjoy sent a mental chuckle as well.

“Can you sense it, everyone?” Skyfire Brightshore’s eyes were closed as he sent out his senses. “It is true. Many of the prime essences in this place are different from ours.”

Ning was attuning himself to the local prime essences as well.

This place was similar to the Endless Territories in that both had a

prime essence of the sword, a prince essence of fire, a prime essence of water, a prime essence of lightning, a prime essence of space, and many other types of prime essence. These prime essences were like giant stone pillars that were holding up the entire universe they were in, and the outermost ripples of these prime essences could be sensed and attuned to by cultivators. In this respect, things were exactly the same as they were in the Endless Territories!

Thus, cultivation was a similar process as well. However, ‘inside’ the prime essences things were very different.

“In the Endless Territories, the prime essence of the sword is more all-encompassing and massive. In this alternate universe, the prime essence of the sword seems to be more reserved but also more savage,” Ning mused.

The five of them were all curiously attuning themselves to the local prime essences.

“According to our star maps, our current location is quite a long ways off from the Archaeus region. Let us head off, gentlemen,” Waterlord Firesurge said.

“Yes, time to head off.”

“Our journey is a long one. Our most important mission right now is to reach the Archaeus region safely.”

“Let’s go.”

Although the five were all very confident, and although their chances of reaching the Archaeus region were quite high, they didn’t dare to be reckless. The distance between their location and the Archaeus region truly was quite great, as the Archaeus region was the core of this entire alternate universe and was truly, indescribably vast.

According to their star maps, it would take Ning’s group at least 1500 years to go from the transversal conduit to the Archaeus region. They would have to go through more than three thousand territories! World-level cultivators would almost never be willing to take on a journey of

such distances, as it would be simply far too dangerous. Who knew when they would perish?

It took them two months to go to the nearest spacetime transfer array. The spacetime transfer arrays here were quite similar to the ones in the Endless Territories. Clearly, the two universes had very similar systems of cultivation.

Be it by flying, teleporting, or using spacetime transfer arrays, the group advanced through the alternate universe for more than a hundred years. Finally, they reached a specific chaos planet that was the core of a spacetime transfer array they had to pass through.

Deep within a gorge on this planet, there were a series of estates where other World-level cultivators resided.

Crackle. Pop.

A figure was seated in the lotus position by the banks of a lake, his entire body wreathed in flames that didn't cause any damage to the nearby mud or grass at all.

Swoosh.

A streak of light flew towards him from afar. It was a green-haired World God who was carrying a greataxe on his back and radiated an aura of great strength.

"Five World-level cultivators arrived," the green-haired World God growled.

"Oh? Five dared to trespass in our territory? Do they have extraordinary backgrounds?" The flaming figure asked.

"They should be outsiders. I've never seen them before," the green-haired World God said.

"Never seen them before? Mm. We should know all of the World-level cultivators in the ten or so territories around us. If we don't know them... they must have come from very far away." The flaming figure let out a hoarse chuckle. "Inform the other leaders. Begin our preparations for

killing these outsiders. We discovered them, so I insist on getting a full share."

"Understood," the green-haired World God said respectfully.

"By now, we've killed more than three hundred World-level cultivators. Still... that's not enough. We aren't even close to our quota of a thousand," the flaming figure mused softly.

# Chapter 27: Ambushed

Ji Ning's squad of five descended upon this chaos planet.

They were able to see the heart of the spacetime transfer array far off in the distance. Here in this alternate universe, cultivators also used chaos nectar and chaos jewels for bartering.

“Halt!”

An Elder God standing in front of a beautiful palace suddenly bellowed at them. Although the five before him were all World-level cultivators, and although he was merely an Elder God, he was a representative of a universe-wide organization which dominated this entire universe, the Church of Annihilation. Every single spacetime transfer array in this alternate universe was governed by the Church of Annihilation.

No major powers would dare to challenge the might and prestige of the Church of Annihilation! In this universe, the Church of Annihilation was an utterly exalted and supreme organization!

“We are going to the star of Cricket,” Heartlord Solewind said with a smile. Here in the alternate universe, it was usually Solewind’s responsibility to meet and speak with the locals.

“The spacetime transfer array is currently under maintenance. It’ll be half a month before it can be activated,” the Elder God said.

“Half a month?” Ning and the others looked at each other, feeling quite helpless. Spacetime transfer arrays did indeed require maintenance and repairs. If they were not given the proper maintenance, these ancient devices would slowly begin to break down. Ning’s group had no choice but to leave for now. They travelled a few hundred kilometers away and landed within a beautiful mountain valley.

“Let’s wait here for half a month,” Heartlord solewind said.

“The Church of Annihilation truly is incredible. It was actually able to take complete control over this entire alternate universe. The Endless Territories is just one part of our own universe, but it’s still divided up into

many different organizations,” Prince Greatjoy sent mentally. He couldn’t help but sigh. “In the Endless Territories, more than 99% of the people belong to the Dao Alliance, but the Dao Alliance is dispersed into many different locations. Everyone operates independently, with some training and some fighting. As for the spacetime transfer arrays, the local schools and sects are allowed to run them.”

Ning chuckled as well. The Dao Alliance was quite relaxed... but that was why Ning liked it. It granted freedom and governed on a principle of non-governance.

“Cultivators, by our very nature, wish for freedom,” Solewind said. “The reason why the Brightshore Kingdom is so unified is because the almighty Hegemon is so strong as to completely overpower everyone else! The reason why the Aeonians are so unified is because if they aren’t unified, they’ll be wiped out as a race! The Dao Alliance is simply too strong, forcing them to be unified if they wish to survive. The reason why those other top-tier organizations are unified is also because they are few in number. They can’t not be unified.”

“And this alternate universe?” Firesurge asked.

Ning was curious as well. “For this universe to be completely unified is truly inconceivable.”

“Absolutely.”

The five of them were all extraordinary figures. In the future, if they worked hard in their cultivation, they would become truly monstrous Daolords. They were all very proud individuals, but they felt the utmost of admiration and awe towards this organization which had dominated and unified an entire universe.

The five of them continued to wait there quietly, drinking while chatting. But of course, when they discussed sensitive matters they sent mental messages to each other.

“Eh?” Their faces tightened at the exact same instant.

Boom!

The world around them changed as countless roaring waves came crashing out towards them in an apocalyptic scene. The waves swept straight towards the five of them, and at the edges of the endless waves there were a number of World-level cultivators who were riding the waves forward. They stared at Ning's group of five, their eyes filled with murderous intentions.

"We've just been waylaid." Ning's group knew what was happening.

"Elder brothers, let me handle these waves." Firesurge was dressed in deep blue robes and his face was grim and cold. He was quite humble when speaking to Ning and the other three, but he was filled with nothing besides icy contempt towards these attacking cultivators. He waved his hand. BOOM! A ring of seemingly ordinary black water began to spread out in every direction around him.

The ring of black water was able to easily defend against the roaring waves.

"What?"

"The 'Empyrean Divine Water Formation' we set up using 109 World-level cultivators was blocked with such ease?" The attackers were all horrified and shocked.

"Break!" Firesurge let out a cold snort, and the roaring waves of water suddenly were pushed backwards, causing the entire formation to collapse.

"It was only meant to bind and capture them anyhow. If we can't capture them, we will just kill them." A golden-winged World God issued mental orders to the others. Although he could tell that Firesurge wasn't an easy person to deal with, he was very confident in his groups abilities. Given their overwhelming advantage in numbers, he truly felt no concern whatsoever.

The awe-inspiring horde of World-level cultivators suddenly switched to a different formation, causing blurry light to spread out amongst their ranks. All of them were now reinforced by the formation they were using, and they charged towards Ning's group.

“They really are courting death.” Prince Greatjoy let out a cold laugh as he slapped out with his left hand. His left palm instantly expanded to become thirty thousand meters in size, and it emanated an aura of dazzling golden light. This dazzling golden palm moved terrifyingly fast as spacetime twisted and distorted in front of it. It was clearly quite far away from the attackers, but it somehow appeared directly in front of them in an instant.

Boom! Boom! Boom! Every single World-level cultivator touched by the golden palm was reduced to dust.

“Is that a Daolord?!”

“That has to be a Daolord!”

“What the hell is going on? He clearly has the aura of a World God.”

“He’s actually a Daolord pretending to be a World God!” The attackers were instantly scared silly.

Skyfire Brightshore let out a laugh. “There are quite a few attackers. Let me handle them.”

“GWAAAR!” Skyfire opened his mouth and let out a loud, furious roar as flames began to belch forth. The flames instantly covered the entire area and began blasting out in every direction. It must be understood that although Prince Greatjoy was very strong, each of his palm-strikes was only able to kill roughly ten or so World-level cultivators at once. This ring of fire, however, spread out in every direction. There was no way for anyone to run at all.

“Ahhhhh!” Some of the weaker Chaos Immortals were instantly burnt into dust. Even the World Gods with weaker bodies were burnt to ashes.

“Run away immediately!”

“These five World-level cultivators are way too strong.”

“They are probably all transcendent World Gods!”

“Why is our luck such shit?”

Some of the strongest World Gods, along with ones who had access to

decent protective divine abilities, were able to endure the roaring flames. Just over twenty of them were able to survive and quickly began to flee in every direction. Although some of them were incredibly strong, they no longer wished to continue this fight against Ning's group.

Ning nodded as he watched. The flames which Skyfire Brightshore had unleashed seemed to be slightly more powerful than his Chaos-level [Novessence Thunder] technique had been.

"Skyfire, let me give you a hand." Ning let out a chuckle.

Whoooosh.

Seven streaks of Dao lightning and seven streams of Dao water instantly spread out to cover an area of a million kilometers, catching all of the fleeing World Gods within their area of effect. The Dao lightning and the Dao water were simply too fast; there was no way for them to escape.

The lightning and water all transformed into enormous greatswords that danced through the skies. The entire region of a million kilometers became transformed into an enormous domain of chaotic might. The terrifyingly powerful sword-intent filling this domain tore at the bodies of every single World God, resulting in many of them ground to dust by the clashing and grinding power of the lightning sword-intent and water sword-intent.

It was like an enormous millstone had ground them to bits!

The Yin-Yang Sword Domain, at maximum power, was something which quickly cause even Daolords of the First Step to perish! Even if Ning expanded the zone to cover an area of a million kilometers, Daolords of the First Step would still suffer very heavy injuries, to say nothing of these World-level cultivators.

"Brother Darknorth, your domain truly is formidable. Let me finish the stragglers." Heartlord Solewind let out a laugh, then turned his gaze to the two World Gods who had made it very far away and were still struggling to flee.

"Why are they this powerful?!"

“Even our transcendent World Gods were wiped out?!”

“B-but...”

“Where the hell did these five come from?!”

The two World Gods who had managed to survive the Yin-Yang Sword Domain were terrified senseless by now. Of the two, one was a transcendent World God while the other was merely a supreme World God. The one thing they shared in common was that both had incredibly powerful protective divine abilities. There was no way for them to actually escape the domain itself, but their bodies were tough enough to let them survive for a moment longer.

“What is going-....”

“I...”

“Ahaha... death, sweet death! Once I die, I’ll have no more worries.”

Boom! Boom!

The two World Gods simultaneously fell to the ground, completely lifeless.

Heartlord Solewind’s lips curved upwards slightly.

“Those two were both elite World Gods, but you were able to make them both commit suicide, Solewind. Admirable, admirable.” Ning nodded.

“They were utterly terrified and driven to the brink of despair by your attacks, my friends. That’s why it was so easy for me to deal with them.” Heartlord Solewind smiled.

Ning and the other three, however, were still shocked by what had happened.

The ability to force a World God to commit suicide? Although the four of them were impressive, none of them were capable of such a thing. True Heartforce Cultivators really were terrifying.

The five of them quickly cleaned up the battlefield, getting rid of the corpses and dividing up the spoils.

“These World-level cultivators weren’t bad. They were fairly strong.” Prince Greatjoy frowned. “There were actually more than ten supreme World Gods and three or four transcendent World Gods! It doesn’t really make sense for there to have been that many transcendent World Gods, does it?”

# Chapter 28: The Reason

“The alternate universe is fairly similar to our own.” Ji Ning also felt that something was off. “Logically speaking, less than one in a thousand World Gods would have reached a transcendent level of power. For this group of a hundred World-level cultivators to have so many supreme World Gods and three or four transcendent World Gods doesn’t make sense. Where the hell did they come from?”

Ning and the other four had effortlessly dominated the group, not giving them any chance to fight back before perishing. Thus, Ning’s group was only able to come to a general approximation regarding how strong they were.

“Let me take a look.” Skyfire Brightshore immediately soared into the skies, then cast his gaze down upon the entire chaos planet as his eyes blazed with fire.

“Hm. Let me take a look on the other side of the chaos planet.” The chaos planet was a sphere, and on the other side of the planet they ended up finding a large number of estates.

“They should be residing in that place.” Solewind cast his gaze downwards. “And... I see quite a few restrictive formations. There’s no way to use godsense to scan the place.”

“We killed 126 World-level cultivators, but there are nearly 150 estates there.” Ning frowned. “Are there still others?”

“Even if there are, they would’ve fled,” Prince Greatjoy said.

This guess was correct.

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A group of nineteen World-level cultivators were hiding within an empty part of the primordial chaos. All of them had ugly looks on their faces as they traded glances. In their eyes could be seen both terror and joy.

“Thank goodness we were responsible for keeping watch over the headquarters.”

“That was terrifying.”

“All those life tablets went poof in an instant. None of them survived!”

When they thought back to the sight of all those life tablets shattering at the same instant, they couldn’t help but be seized by terror once more.

The World-level cultivators had all left behind life tablets so that the others would know if they were alive or not. Just now, when this group had been convening in their headquarters, they realized to their astonishment that a total of 126 life tablets had shattered apart in the same instant. Even the life tablets of the terrifyingly strong transcendent World Gods who they had dreaded were quickly shattered.

It had been a complete massacre!

Although they didn’t personally witness the battle, the wholesale annihilation of the life tablets was enough for them to guess at what had happened. They had been so terrified that they immediately fled from their headquarters and used a spatial teleportation to escape.

“Some of them had extremely powerful protective divine abilities. Logically speaking, even if they were attacked by Daolords they would’ve merely been captured and drawn into magic treasures to be slowly ground down. But... all those life tablets shattered in almost the blink of an eye.”

“What the hell did they run into?”

“Those five World-level cultivators... was a major power hiding amongst their ranks?”

The lucky survivors speculated wildly, but were unable to go beyond speculation. They would never dare to return to that place.

And so, just like that this formidable local organization disappeared, never to be heard of again.

This group of World-level cultivators truly had been quite powerful. Unfortunately, they had run into Ning’s group of five. These five were the most freakishly talented of the freakishly talented. Anyone besides the five of them would’ve found it extremely difficult to deal with this group.

For fear that this matter might have unexpected repercussions, Ning's group decided to temporarily hide within a vacant region of primordial chaos as Prince Greatjoy stealthily investigated the matter. "Given my abilities, not even Daolords would be able to detect my actions unless they are even stronger than I am in the Dao of Spacetime." In terms of mastery over spacetime, Prince Greatjoy's level of expertise was superior to even that of many Daolords of the Second Step who specialized in the Dao of Spacetime.

As for those who weren't particularly skilled? Not even Daolords of the Fourth Step would be able to discover any traces of him.

This was why the Dao of Spacetime was such a terrifying Dao.

"Nothing seems to be happening whatsoever. It seems as though that was nothing more than an ordinary robbery attempt." Bandits were common in every universe, and there were many within the Brightshore Kingdom as well. Even in the Endless Territories, there were World-level cultivators who delighted in waylaying and robbing others. This was the fastest way of acquiring treasures, a way far faster and safer than adventuring in ruins left behind by Daolords. A sufficiently prepared ambush was far safer than adventuring in unexplored regions.

Time slowly flowed on. Ning's group continued to advance, behaving even more cautiously than before as they moved through one territory after another. Despite that, they still suffered yet another ambush.

Even though they were moving with extreme caution, they had suffered two consecutive ambushes in a row. As for the results were... there were no surprises whatsoever. Anyone who dared to ambush Ning's group was absolutely courting death.

Rumble...

Three World Gods were swept away by an enormous wave of water and smashed violently upon the ground.

The earth shuddered and split apart from the force of the collision. The three World Gods hurriedly rose to their feet, then stared in terror at the five World-level cultivators who were slowly descending upon them from

the skies.

“They are terrifyingly strong.”

“W-way too strong.”

“How can World Gods be this strong?”

The eyes of the three World Gods were filled with terror. They would never forget what they had just seen. That terrifying finger-art... every single wave of the finger had caused World-level cultivators to perish. That terrifying wave... it had crushed more than half of them to death in an instant. As for the ones who wanted to flee, they were slain by crashing bolts of lightning. In the end, only the three of them had managed to survive, and only because their foes let them live.

Only now did they realize that it was possible for World-level cultivators to reach such a level of power.

“You can continue to live,” Prince Greatjoy said coldly, “But you have to do as I say.”

“Y-y-yes.” The three World Gods hurriedly nodded.

“Swear a lifeblood oath that you will never divulge what happened today to anyone. In addition, swear that you will honestly answer any questions we ask you,” Prince Greatjoy ordered grimly.

“Yes.” The three World Gods didn’t even think about fighting back or arguing as they all obediently swore the lifeblood oaths. All three of them were dressed in gray armored robes. Normally, these gray-robed cultivators were viewed as nightmares by other cultivators, but today they were filled with the utmost of reverence towards their captors. They put away their gray armored robes and lowered their heads, for fear of offending the five before them.

“Why did you attempt to waylay us?” Prince Greatjoy asked as Ning and the others watched.

“There were only five of you, and all of you were World-level cultivators. We thought you’d be easy to deal with.” A skinny man with a long beard

hurried to be the first to respond.

“No other reasons? You were going to kill us just because we were easy targets?” Prince Greatjoy was puzzled, and he swept his gaze across the other two.

“Right.”

“That is the case.”

The three all immediately nodded.

Ning and the others exchanged a glance. This was the third time they had been ambushed in the past month. It must be understood that it would take them roughly a thousand years to travel from the transversal conduit to the Archaeus region. It would make sense for them to be ambushed once every decade, but for them to be ambushed three times in one month made no sense. And yet... apparently this was nothing more than a normal attempt at highway robbery.

“We were ambushed three times in one month.” Prince Greatjoy frowned. “Do you know why?”

“You don’t know?” The skinny, bearded World God looked at him.

“Speak!” Prince Greatjoy’s eyes lit up, as did the eyes of Ning and the others.

“Because of Nine Godstars,” the prisoner said hurriedly. “Nine Godstars has already formally announced its criteria for accepting new disciples.”

Ning and the others exchanged a glance. Nine Godstars was an extremely large organization.

“They only accept World-level cultivators as new members, and you have to have personally slain at least a thousand other World-level cultivators before you are qualified to join them,” the bearded man said. “Once news of this spread, not only did this cause an enormous stir in the eighteen territories next to Nine Godstars, it also caused a stir in hundreds of nearby territories! Many extremely powerful World-level cultivators began to furiously hunt down and kill down other World-level cultivators. It has

been an absolute massacre. Weaker cultivators like us have nowhere to hide, and so we have to join together in large numbers to stay safe.”

“What? You have to kill a thousand World-level cultivators in order to become a member of the sect?” Skyfire Brightshore was shocked.

“That’s a bit crazy.” Heartlord Solewind frowned.

“This entrance requirement...” Ning shook his head.

To kill a thousand World-level cultivators was an extremely difficult. Even enslaved, oathbound World-level slaves were only willing to serve because it gave them a chance to stay alive! If a master insisted on slaying his slaves, the slave would probably go all-out in fighting back. If the slave was going to die no matter what, he would generally prefer to die fighting. When Daolord Windsource was about to die, his slaves would often curse and berate him as they no longer had anything to fear.

Even if you were an extremely powerful cultivator... after many battles, some unexpected variables might occur. You might’ve worked hard to kill several hundred cultivators, only to end up dead in ditch for some reason.

To actually kill a thousand would be very, very difficult.

“Nine Godstars is the number one sect within hundreds of territories, after all.” Next to the bearded man was an extremely muscular World God dressed in scale armor. He said hurriedly, “Nine Godstars has nine major branches, and each branch is led by a major power who is at the Verge of the Daomerge. As for its most powerful expert, that person is ranked as one of the elite Paladins of the Church of Annihilation.”

Ning’s group knew all this. The Church of Annihilation was in control of this entire alternate universe and was an utterly enormous organization. The ‘Paladins’ of the Church of Annihilation held high positions and were extremely respected.

“Nine Godstars will only be accepting eighteen disciples this time,” the scaled World God said hurriedly. “They’ll stop once the final slot is taken! I hear that the top three will be given Archaeus medallions and be sent to the legendary Archaeus region.”

“Archaeus medallions?” Ning and the others were all intrigued.

Archaeus medallions were extremely valuable. The almighty Hegemon had sent his will through the transversal conduit and used many schemes but had only been able to accumulate a few of those medallions over the course of countless years.

“That’s why everyone in the surrounding territories has gone mad. Not only will they have a chance of becoming a disciple, they’ll even have a chance of gaining a legendary Archaeus medallion. All of the transcendent World-level cultivators in the nearby territories have all hastened over here. There’s nowhere for weaker World Gods like us to run.” The bearded man shook his head. “That’s why you’ll encounter ambushes throughout these territories. Most likely, it’ll only come to an end after Nine Godstars accepts its eighteenth and final disciple.”

Finally, Ning’s group had an answer as to why there was such a high concentration of powerful cultivators. It was because the weaker ones had all been killed!

The ones still alive were fairly strong, and some had actually hastened to this place from other territories.

“If they knew that all five of us each hold an Archaeus medallion... I can’t even imagine how many World Gods would come to surround and attack us. There might even be Daolords coming for us.” Skyfire Brightshore sent an amused mental message to the others.

“Haha, we definitely can’t let them find out.”

Now that they knew the reason behind this... they still felt some pressure, but they also felt much more relaxed.

“It seems as though we will often be attacked over the next century or so,” Prince Greatjoy sent. “Everyone, let’s not be too reckless. The mighty Nine Godstars sect is behind this matter. If we attract the attention of their experts, we will be doomed.”

“Right.” Ning and the others all nodded.

# Chapter 29: Adventures

Ji Ning and the others were very careful. However, the Nine Godstars sect had sent out dozens of Daolords of the First Step to keep watch over the place, with the goal of preventing some truly dazzlingly talented World-level cultivators from being surrounded, trapped, and killed. These Daolords had all broken through via usage of Pseudo Samsara Pills.

These Daolords of the First Step were scattered across the local territories, keeping a secret look out for particularly dazzling and talented World-level cultivators. If they found one, they would be permitted to return to the sect in advance.

When roaming, they would actively emanate their Samsara Daolord auras, making it so that the World-level cultivators would not dare to act against them. There was a significant difference in power between them and Samsara Daolords, after all! Ji Ning, for example, would probably be merely a match for Daolords of the First Step if he was relying solely on his sword-arts. It was thanks to the azureflower mist energy strengthening his body and making it comparable to a Daolord's that he was able to rise above them in power.

Firesurge, Greatjoy, and the others had their own divine abilities and secret arts as well.

Generally speaking, it was very difficult to rely on mere divine abilities to defeat those at a completely different level. The [Fogstone Apocalypse] was a very good example of a divine ability that didn't qualify! Only some truly, devastatingly powerful divine abilities would do the trick, such as the [Five Seals Sword Dao] of Emperor Mirrorsnow. Alas, there was no way for Ning to use it.

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Mighty divine abilities, secret arts, powerful innate gifts like Skyfire's, supportive techniques like Ning's azureflower mist energy... this was what was needed, along with ridiculously profound insights into the Dao, for a World-level cultivator to be able to slay a Daolord of the First Step! And of

course, not even the likes of Bertulu would be able to slay a Daolord of the Second Step.

Thus, it was generally quite safe for Daolords of the First Step to be used to patrol most territories.

But of course, the Nine Godstars sect naturally would keep this type of mission a secret. Those World-level cultivators all believed that the only way to succeed was by killing a thousand of their peers, which was why they remained as berserk as ever.

“Damn.”

Sixteen years after they entered the sphere of influence of the Nine Godstars sect.

Ning and the others were in an empty part of space. They exchanged glances with each other, their faces grim.

“Greatjoy, you were a bit rash this time.” Heartlord Solewind had a rather ugly look on his face as he stared at the magic treasures and suits of armor floating in front of them.

“We had no other options! When we refused to follow that Daolord of the First Step, he tried to abduct us by force. You know that we cannot reveal our true identities.” Prince Greatjoy had an ugly look on his face as well as he spoke mentally to the other four. “We lied to him and told him that we are members of other sects, but he completely ignored us. We had no choice but to kill him!”

“We killed a Daolord of the Nine Godstars sect. Even though he was merely a Daolord of the First Step... I’m sure that the Nine Godstars sect has already found out and is sending people to investigate.” Firesurge was worried as well.

Ning and Skyfire both had solemn looks on their faces as well.

What were they to do?

The actual killing had been quite enjoyable. That Daolord of the First Step had been courting death, acting and speaking in such a dominating

manner towards them. Any of the five were capable of slaughtering that Daolord! But in the end, it had been Prince Greatjoy who punched out with a fist and completely crushed him to death!

“We had no other options, but don’t worry,” Prince Greatjoy sent. “Although the Nine Godstars sect would immediately be notified of his death, it’ll take them some time for their investigators to be sent out and to arrive at this place.”

“And... they can forget about discovering anything.” Prince Greatjoy’s eyes were as cold as ice. “Give me one hour. I will completely scramble spacetime here and make it impossible for them to invert the flow of time, unless they bring someone who is ten times more skilled than myself in the Dao of Spacetime.”

“Alright.” Ning and the others felt stunned. Right. Greatjoy had reached a tremendously high level of skill in the Dao of Spacetime. If he was to scramble spacetime in the surrounding area, it would be difficult for even the Nine Godstars sect to find out what had happened here. At the very least, it would buy them some time.

Ugh. They had been doing their best to be low-key, but it was impossible for them to completely avoid showing at least part of their true power when they had to deal with so many ambushes. In addition, they had no idea that there were Daolords patrolling about in secret. In the end, one of them actually chased the five of them down. The five didn’t dare to actually go visit the Nine Godstars sect, as once their identities were revealed they would quite possibly face annihilation.

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Ning’s group destroyed all the evidence at the scene and scrambled spacetime, then transformed into different appearances. They even summoned quite a few World-level retainers and servants from their estate-worlds, then continued to venture forth in a nine-cultivator squad.

Things happened just as they had predicted.

Roughly two years later, a Daolord of the Third Step from the Nine Godstars sect arrived in the place where they had slain the first Daolord.

Given how powerful the Nine Godstars sect was, for them to calculate where their Daolord had died was an easy task! But of course, to actually divine the identity of the killer was virtually impossible. When World God Northrest had died, there had been no way for Vastheaven Palace to divine who had done it. They had to have more variables to work with in order to lower the difficulty of the Numerancy divination.

“Eh?”

“Spacetime has been scrambled here.” When the Daolord of the Third Step sought to reverse the flow of time and see what had happened, all he saw was a field of completely distorted and chaotic spacetime. There was no way to investigate at all.

“Did that servant of mine offend a major power who was skilled in the Dao of Spacetime?” The Daolord murmured to himself, “Perhaps my servant offended him, resulting in my servant being killed... and yet, that major power did not wish to become an enemy of our Nine Godstars sect... and so he scrambled spacetime here?”

Daolords who walked the Dao of Spacetime were notoriously tough to deal with. When this Daolord of the Third Step realized that spacetime had been completely scrambled here, he couldn’t help but feel sour about this matter.

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In the end, the Nine Godstars sect was still the most dominating force in the hundreds of nearby territories. How could they possibly just let this matter come to an end?

However, if they wanted to get to the bottom of this matter they would have to invite a true master of the Dao of Spacetime to head out from their headquarters and investigate in person. The entire sect, however, only had two Daolords who were skilled in the Dao of Spacetime. One was a Daolord of the Second Step, while the other was a venerable figure who had reached the Verge of the Daomerge and was the third most respected figure of the entire sect.

The Daolord of the Second Step wasn’t willing to take the risk, whereas

there was no one capable of giving orders to the Verge-level Daolord. Thus, more than a hundred years passed before the latter finally decided to head out and take a look.

“What’s this?!” When this mighty Daolord unscrambled spacetime, he was immediately shocked and stunned by what he discovered.

“Five World-level cultivators? One of them attacked and slew a Daolord of the First Step with a single blow?” This Daolord was stunned. “Where the hell did these freaks come from? Although I wasn’t able to see how strong the other four were, this one is incredibly strong. And... judging from how he scrambled spacetime, he has to be an extremely skilled master of the Dao of Spacetime.”

“Where the hell did they come from?”

Not even the entire Nine Godstars sect had a single disciple who was this freakishly talented!

There was no way for him to know, of course, that this man was an honorary disciple of an almighty Hegemon in a different universe and one of the most elite members of the Brightshore Kingdom. The Nine Godstars sect was nothing compared to the Brightshore Kingdom! It must be understood that the Brightshore Kingdom had entire squads of freakishly strong Daolords who were comparable to Eternal Emperors.

“We have to find and recruit this person into our Nine Godstars sect. I’ll chase him down!”

He gave the order, and the entire Nine Godstars sect sprang into action. He truly would have loved to take on such a freakishly talented disciple. He himself walked the Dao of Spacetime, and it was incredibly rare for him to encounter someone of such talent who walked his Dao. Alas, by this point in time Ning’s group of five had long ago escaped from the Nine Godstars sect’s sphere of influence.

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The Nine Godstars sect was extremely influential in their local cluster of several hundred territories, but beyond that their influence and power

dropped rapidly.

Aside from their slaying of that Daolord of the First Step, Ning's group encountered another extremely dangerous situation during their journey. Ning's group accidentally ran into a nation of special lifeforms that was wandering the primordial chaos. That nation of special lifeforms was actually established atop the shell of an utterly enormous turtle, and the turtle-like creature was clearly in a state of hibernation, slumbering as it drifted through the void of space.

This part of the journey should've been a safe one. Who would've thought that they'd run into such an unusual nation? Ning's group ran into this nation by accident, and they were immediately attacked by one of those special lifeforms which sought to eat them alive. Ning's group was forced to fight back, which only attracted the attention of even more of those special lifeforms.

Fortunately, that giant slumbering turtle did not wake up. Ning and the others all had the feeling that the turtle's aura was utterly terrifying. Once it woke up, it would be incredibly easy for it to kill all five of them. No matter what they would've tried, they still probably wouldn't have been able to survive the slumbering turtle's attack.

In the end, Ning and the others joined forces and managed to just barely escape. From start to finish, they didn't dare to actually kill so much as a single one of those special lifeforms, for fear of stirring the hornet's nest and waking that giant turtle.

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Aside from the Nine Godstars sect and the titanic turtle, the other problems they encountered were largely irrelevant.

"The Archaeus region. We've finally arrived."

Ning's group of five stood in the air, staring off into the distance. In front of them was a region filled with countless roiling clouds that flickered with violet light. This gigantic region covered by clouds was the Archaeus region! But of course, this was nothing more than the tip of the iceberg, a minuscule part of the massive, actual region. None of them even

knew exactly how far off the Archaeus region stretched.

After journeying for 1605 years, Ning's group had finally reached the Archaeus region.

# Credits

Translator: [Iewatermelons](#)

Epub: [Estevam](#) / [dotNOVEL](#)